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OR,

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The Fair Fiend of the Cœur d'Alene.

BY CAPTAIN H. HOLMES,
AUTHOR OF "HERCULES GOLDSPUR," "BROAD-
CLOTH BURT," "CALIFORNIA CLAUDE,"
"FLASH DAN," "CENTIPEDE
SAM," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.
THE YELLOW SPY.

SATAN'S OWN, nestling deep in the Cœur d'Alene mountains, was not six months old, and yet it had a goodly number of cabins, peopled, for the most part, by as motley a set of men as ever circumstances had thrown together.

The gold-camp had a reputation for desperateness that had carried its name far beyond the mountain territory; it was the home of twelve characters who had acquired the collective name of the Desperate Dozen, and that they deserved this title, the pages of our present romance will show.

Chance had not thrown these men together: they were the founders of Satan's Own, having come to the spot in a body, and broken ground, for the camp in the richest gold region of the now famous Cœur d'Alene country.

"EF YOU AR' A SPY ON THE DOZEN, GO AN' TELL 'EM WHAR WE AR' TER BE FOUND!
BE OFF!" THE HEAVY SIX-SHOOTER COVERED THE CHINAMAN.

The Desperate Dozen.

Nobody knew where they had come from, nobody had ever asked, for everybody in camp was expected to attend strictly to his own business. The penalty for not doing so was no secret; there were six-shooters and steady nerves in Satan's Own.

Far from all railroads, and shut off from the outside world, the capital of golddom flourished after a manner that evidently suited its inhabitants. They had no post-offices, consequently no letters to read.

Now and then some wandering gold-hunter would strike camp, but he never stayed long.

The Desperate Dozen had passed a decree that no more than fifty people should comprise the population of the "city," and the new tenants were waited on by a committee, with a verbal announcement of the manifesto.

That was always enough; nobody had ever stayed to test the strength of the order to vacate.

Near the close of a spring day there came into camp on a knotty burro a well-built specimen of the Celestial race. He had a pick, a shovel, and a small washer hanging from his greasy saddle, and innocence peeped from his little eyes.

He had not reached the center of the mountain-locked camp before he was observed, and the next instant he found himself in the midst of twenty big men in dark shirts, sombreros and high boots.

The Chinaman looked down with perplexing coolness into the menacing eyes of the tenants of Satan's Own, and even smiled, as he said:

"Fin Fin find 'Melican man at last. He stoppee here. Chinee play poker if 'Melican man wants some fun."

The men of Satan's Own exchanged significant looks while the Celestial began to dismount.

"Let's fleece the pig-tail afore we enforce the order on him," said one man. "He can't play successfully ag'in' Satan's Own. Mebbe the fool has got a lot o' dust; he's our pigeon, if he has."

"I say send him on right away," was the retort that came from a very handsome rough who had eyed the Chinee with much curiosity from the moment of his entrance into camp. "Hang me! if I like the shadow ov one o' that race. I hev cause ter hate ther hull lay-out. Send 'im on, right off. Don't let him get a foot-hold hyer."

"We'll pluck him first, Merced," was the answer.

"An' give him a chance ter locate hyer."

"No; ther order's ag'in' that."

"Wal, pluck 'im first an' be blamed quick about it. Thar's more in that yaller imp than you see on ther surface. He's no fool, an' I'll bet my seat in paradise that he didn't stumble onto this camp accidentally."

Merced Monte, as the speaker was called, darted the Chinaman a look of bitter antagonism and walked away.

"Don't I hate 'em?" he ground out from between clinched teeth. "I wish ther hull race hed but one neck, an' that Merced Monte's hands war at it! Ther boys back thar think they've found a lamb, but my opinion is that they've run ag'in' a tiger in that yaller skin. Suthin' important brought him ter camp; them minin' implements danglin' from his saddle ar' mere sham. Fin Fin, eh? All right, boys! Git rid ov thet yaller devil inside ov an hour, er by heavens! I'll take a trigger-hand in ther game."

Merced Monte walked to one of the cabins and entered. Going to one corner, he raised a board and took a small package from under it. Then he walked to the door which he had left slightly ajar and opened it. Several layers of heavy brown paper and then one of buckskin were unwrapped, and the stalwart desperado reached the picture of a beautiful young girl, not past sixteen.

He looked at it some time in silence.

"Ten ter one thet ef she had never been born, that Chinee would not be in camp ter-day!" he suddenly exclaimed. "By Jove! I'd stake my life on this! Don't I know what fetched him hyer? If he overstays my hour, thar'll be a dead rose of Cathay in this town."

He wrapped up the picture carefully, and restored it to its place under the board, then he began to pace the little apartment like a man laboring under great excitement.

Ever and anon he would glance out where the evening shadows were falling, telling him that another day had passed.

"Time up!" he said, speaking aloud for the first time in many minutes. "I'll see what the boys have done. They've had time to fleece the lamb. If they are not through, I'll finish the game."

He left the cabin and walked toward a group of men visible from its door.

There was an expression of cool determination about Merced Monte's lips, and his eyes gittered savagely when they caught sight of the yellow visitor in the midst of the crowd.

The hour was up and the rash Celestial was still in Satan's Own.

Nobody had ever bantered the roughs of the Idaho camp in vain for a game of poker, and Fin Fin's proposition to play had been acceded to

with an alacrity which, to say the least, was very suspicious.

A rough deal table had been carried to a certain spot in front of a cabin, and the Chinaman and three other men were playing for pretty high stakes, surrounded by a dark-faced crowd.

Already the men of Satan's Own had discovered that the Celestial was no child at cards; his eye was keen enough to detect cheating, and it nipped in the bud the carrying out of several schemes to fleece him without mercy.

Fortune was on the side of Fin Fin when Merced Monte came up.

The big rough edged his way to the table and looked across it into the immobile face of the Chinaman.

Fin Fin did not appear to see him.

"See hyer! I gave you an hour in this camp," suddenly said Merced Monte, in a voice that instantly attracted attention.

Everybody looked up.

"I mean *you*," continued the stalwart sport, eying the yellow visitor. "We don't want heathens in this camp. The Chinese must go. Pick up yer winnings, throw down yer hand, an' git!"

For several seconds no change was visible in the Chinaman's face, then a look of sullen defiance grew slowly in his eyes which became riveted upon Merced Monte, whose gaze fell under them.

"Cards down—money up! Go!" continued the rough. "Thar's a standin' order in this town. Shall I read it ter yer?"

"No readee. Fin Fin knows," was the answer.

"Then, obey it. I give you just one minute to find yer hoss. You know whar he is. If you hesitate I'll prevent you from ever seein' ther Flowery Kingdom ag'in with *this*."

Quick as a flash Merced Monte's hand went up and the biggest revolver in Satan's Own was poked across the table into the Celestial's face.

"We keep the magic number ov inhabitants in this camp—no more, no less," continued the bronzed rough. "Now, ter yer hoss. If you come back hyer I'll separate yer brains. You may know me. I'm Merced Monte!"

With his eyes fastened on the speaker the Chinee quietly dropped the cards and stepped back. He did not say a word; the gold on the table he left untouched.

Slowly he walked away to where his burro stood waiting for him, and climbed into the saddle. When firmly seated therein, he turned toward the astonished group and showed them all a twinkling eye.

"'Melican man drive Fin Fin off," he exclaimed. "By 'm by he come back an' show 'em a game not played with cards. The game has been hunted down. Fin Fin has found the doomed men of Stanislaus!"

The men of the gold-camp saw his lips move, but did not hear his words.

Merced Monte started toward him with the revolver.

"Threatenin' vengeance with yer eyes, eh?" he flashed. "Come back an' play thet game ef ye dare! We ask nothin' better than *that*. Ef you ar' a spy on the Dozen, go an' tell 'em whar we ar' ter be found! Be off!"

The heavy six-shooter covered the Chinaman, but did not hasten his going.

He gathered up the lines with irritating tardiness, and urged his long-haired and sleepy steed slowly away.

The assembled citizens of Satan's Own watched him disappear and then burst into a loud derisive laugh at Merced Monte's expense.

"Laugh ef yer want ter," said the big tough, biting his lip under the long mustache that hid his mouth. "Thet Celestial is no infant. Time may prove my words. I think the future welfare ov Satan's Own would be secured if I had dropped him with the pasteboards in his hand. You took him for a lamb; I know him for a tiger."

"Thet almond-eyed cherub!" cried several.

"That straw-flower a tiger with claws!"

"That's what I've said," said Merced Monte. "Wait an' see."

The night deepened about Satan's Own, the stars came out and hung suspended like lamps over the desperadoes' capital.

The largest room in camp was filled with rough-looking men, and all at once they were joined by a person who was very dark, a perfect athlete, and the possessor of black eyes, and raven hair that fell about a pair of magnificent shoulders.

"Montana!" exclaimed a dozen men at sight of him, and he was instantly surrounded by the whole crowd.

"Ah! hyer you are, Merced!" exclaimed the new-comer starting toward Merced Monte whom he saw at that moment. "Did you have any trouble with the two men I saw just out of camp?"

"With ther *two*? I ordered an almond-eyed seraph from town," was the reply. "He went away at the muzzle ov my dropper, too. But you saw two men, Montana?"

"Two, an' one was a Chinaman."

"The—devil! What war the other man like?"

"He is about yer size, Merced, but younger. He wears a hat like mine, buckskin pants, a vel-

vet jacket an' high boots. I almost ran onto ther pair, but they didn't see me."

"Pards!" cried Merced Monte turning to the crowd. "What did I say? Thet Celestial snake didn't crawl accidentally into Satan's Own. He came as the spy of the man Montana saw. The Desperate Dozen hev a tracker at their heels. Who he is an' what he wants let time find out."

"Hev you an idea, Merced?"

There was no reply, but Merced Monte turned to Montana, and gave him a look that drew him from the cabin at his heels.

"Wal, what do you say?" he demanded of Montana when they had reached the starlight.

"Only this: *All visitors to Satan's Own must be killed in ther order ov the'r comin'!*"

"Thet's it: that's ther only safeguard. Take 'em as they come!"

Three months passed away, but nobody came to Satan's Own.

Its citizens laughed at Merced Monte's prophecy about the Chinee and his pard; but the big rough said nothing.

The summer began to wane.

One night one of the Desperate Dozen opened Merced's door and said:

"Wal, Satan's Own has a visitor at last."

Merced seized a revolver and rushed out. The next minute he stood before—a woman!

CHAPTER II.

MERCED MONTE'S WEDDING.

The coming of a woman to Satan's Own was as astonishing as the fall of a thunderbolt from a clear sky, and Merced Monte, when he saw her seated on a black horse and gazing into his face, could not repress a start and an exclamation of amazement.

"Jehu! a woman in Satan's Own beats creation," he cried. "Thar's no danger ov ther final day bein' nigh, I hope."

A quiet smile was observable at the corners of the new-comer's finely chiseled lips. Her eyes which were black and lustrous, sparkled the moment they fell upon Merced Monte; her tapering fingers clutched the bridle-rein anew.

She might have reached her thirtieth year, certainly she had not passed that point; her figure was full of molded grace, and she was very beautiful.

"Are you Merced Monte?" asked the siren in silvery tones, her deep eyes riveted upon the big desperado who still confronted her with a cocked revolver clutched in his right hand.

"That's my name."

"Ah! you're the man I want to see."

"Me?"

"By Jove! Merced, ye'r in luck," said several voices back of the sport.

"Yes, I want to see *you*," continued the woman. "You have a man in camp called Gospel Noll?"

"Yes."

"Bring him to me."

"Hyer he is!" cried several men, and the next moment they pushed forward a slim man with a sandy beard, and, for the place, a modest-looking personage.

"You used to preach I believe, but not here," observed the woman with a smile as she turned to the man thus brought forward. "Come, Gospel Noll; don't deny it to me."

"He's the gospel sharp that used to make a round ov the California camps," sung out several voices. "Thar's only one Gospel Noll, miss, an' he stands afore ye."

"That is true, sir."

"Yes," asserted the man; "I'm Gospel Noll. What do you want with me?"

"I want you to marry me to that man there," and her finger covered Merced Monte, who seemed to recoil an inch.

A boisterous laugh from twenty men was the answer.

"I play no foolish game," the woman went on, speaking like one who has taken a stern resolution. "I am in earnest, Merced Monte—I am going to become your wife, *here and now!*"

Merced Monte came forward at a bound.

"By Heavens! you're mad—crazy!" he cried.

"I have a say in a case ov this kind, I reckon. I don't know you—never saw you afore in all my life. You play no foolish game, eh? Wal, ef this ain't one, shoot me fur a gopher! Me marry you? I'll take time ter consider this case."

"I give no time," was the answer.

"Whar's Montana?" exclaimed Merced.

"Somebody—"

"Let Montana stay where he is," was the interruption. "I came here to marry you, Merced Monte, not Montana. Hold up your hand, and I'll drop mine into it. These men will witness the ceremony. Gospel Noll's words will make it binding. Come, Merced."

Merced Monte did not move.

"I won't!" he said, stubbornly. "I don't take ter jokes ov this kind. Who ar' yer, anyhow?"

"Canyon Clara now, but I'll be Mrs. Merced Monte within five minutes."

"Not while I'm sane!" laughed the big sport. "Jest ride on, will yer? This is Satan's Own, an' it hez been agreed ter kill on sight ther first

stranger that comes ter town. We didn't expect a woman, but—

"Oho, Merced! Didn't look for me, eh?"

"I war lookin' for Satan first!"

"He'll come after me, maybe. Here, Gospel Noll, step to the front. Your hand now, Merced."

The rough showed signs of shrinking away, but all at once the right hand of Canyon Clara shot forward, and the bully of Satan's Own was looking into the muzzle of a silver-plated revolver.

"Take your choice—death or marriage!" came over the polished barrel in tones not to be misunderstood. "I shall count ten, mentally, Merced. If at the end of the count, my hand does not touch yours, I'll send a bullet like a lightning bolt through your brain! I came hither to become your wife; if I fail, it will be because you have become a dead man in this desperate camp. I count now."

In the light of the lamp that hung in front of the one drinking saloon of Satan's Own the crowd in front of the mysterious beauty saw her lips move.

The revolver was gripped in a well-nerved hand and down over it streamed the stern glare of the woman's eyes.

"Take 'er, Merced," whispered a voice at the sport's ears. "What's a marriage by Gospel Noll? By Jehu! one doesn't catch a Cleopatra like that in their Coeur d' Alene kentry every day. Grit yer teeth an' take 'er, Merced."

Merced Monte knew the voice, and if he had glanced over his shoulder, he would have seen Montana at his elbow.

"Take 'er? By Jerusalem! I'll do it," grated Merced Monte, and the next moment his bronzed hand went upward and the white fingers of Canyon Clara dropped lightly into it.

"Now proceed," said the woman glancing at Gospel Noll. "You know the ceremony; you married many a couple in the Golden State."

"Shall I, Merced?" asked the gospel rough appealing to the big desperado.

"It's all right; go on!" Montana ordered.

Gospel Noll, by way of giving some solemnity to the strangest proceedings ever witnessed in Satan's Own, doffed his hat and solemnly lifted his right hand. The spectators did likewise and all stood uncovered during the ceremony.

It did not last long. Gospel Noll asked the usual questions, and Canyon Clara answered in clear, distinct voice, while Merced Monte's replies were grated out, literally forced from him by the stern black eye and the menacing revolver.

At the conclusion of the ceremony the two hands dropped apart and the woman straightened in the saddle with a satisfied smile.

"Thanks, sir!" she said to the strange parson. "You and all present are witnesses to the fact that I am Merced Monte's wife. Let him deny me if he dares! The time will come when you will recall this ceremony, men of Satan's Own. Whom God hath joined together let none of you try to put asunder. Good-night!"

She gathered up the reins as if about to leave the spot, when Monte exclaimed:

"My wife you are, an' you sha'n't quit Satan's Own without my consent! You have played yer game through ter yer satisfaction; now, by the shades ov death! Merced will play his! You move at your peril, woman! I left my cabin with ther intention ov shootin' dead ther first visitor to Satan's Own accordin' ter agreement made ther night ther heathen came ter camp. Lift them lines, try ter quit this town, an' I'll make myself a widower, by heavens!"

Over the lips of the dark-eyed siren rippled a sweet, but defiant laugh. She leaned forward while her lips still quivered.

"No! you won't touch me, Merced," she said. "You won't lift your hand against your wife."

"Why not?" roared the desperado, with a lion's fierceness.

"Because I'd kill you before that hand had reached a level!"

"You would?"

"Try me and see!"

Merced Monte ground his teeth till those nearest him heard them crack; he clinched his hands till the big veins seemed to sink to his palms.

"I go now, now," she went on, each word cutting like a dirk into the quick. "Remember, pard of Satan's Own, that Canyon Clara is that man's wife. Whatever happens hereafter, keep that important fact in view. I have carried out the purpose that brought me hither. The man who follows me to know why I married Merced Monte I will not hesitate to drop in his tracks with a bullet through his head!"

This time she was not molested when she gathered up the reins, and with her eyes fastened on Monte, who stood with every nerve on tension, she rode slowly away.

"In the name of God, what means this, Montana?" cried the big sport, whirling upon his pard. "Is this a dream? No, by Jerusalem! I am awake. You stood by an' saw it all. Twenty men stood around me an' saw me married to a woman I never saw afore ter-night. Ther twenty men ar' cowards! Ther Desperate Dozen hev turned their backs on Merced Monte! Whar's ther g'loot that made that woman my wife?"

Gospel Noll tried to avoid the blazing eyes of the infuriated man by hiding behind two stalwart toughs, but he was not quick enough for Merced Monte.

"You did it!" roared Merced, throwing himself upon the mountain priest with a bound. "I'll send you to Satan unannounced, you infernal gospel sharp! Married me ter a tigress, eh? Life passes from yer soul ter-night for that work! Stand back, men ov Satan's Own, while I shake this Californy dog ter Tartarus!"

The bronze hands of Merced Monte had already found the throat of Gospel Noll, and raising him from the ground, he shook him till he grew purple and then black in the face.

"That's enough!" suddenly commanded the voice of Montana, and his hand fell upon Merced's arm. "You've given Gospel Noll enough. The revolver that forced you forced him. You forget this. Think of the woman who is your wife."

"Wife? who says she is Merced Monte's wife?"

Gospel Noll dropped limp and black from the speaker's hands.

"I say it," said Montana coolly. "She's your wife in the sight ov God an' man. Will you swear ter me, Merced, that you never saw her afore ter-night?"

"I swear it," returned Merced, lifting his right hand. "Thar's whar ther mystery is, Montana. That cool Cleopatra an' I met for ther first time awhile ago. I never forget a face when once seen. What brought her hyer? She came ter marry me an' she did! Can't yer get at ther bottom ov it, Montana? Who backs her? What urges her ter do this? Ah! if I had only scattered that Chinaman's brains over his last poker board!"

"If yer had—what?"

"Thet witch would not be my wife ter-night! But wife er not, I'm goin' ter get ter ther bottom ov all this. I told yer *that* night, months ago, Montana, that somebody war at our heels. What say you now?"

Montana was silent.

"Wal, we didn't kill ther first person what came ter Satan's Own, eh, Montana?" finished Merced, with a laugh. "But, who thought it'd be a woman, an' my future wife?"

Almost at the same moment when Merced finished, the woman called Canyon Clara joined a man on horseback in the mountains, a short distance from the outskirts of Satan's Own.

He appeared to be waiting for some one.

He was young and handsome, and wore buckskin pants, a soft sombrero, and a velvet jacket.

"Well, I was successful," remarked the woman, touching him on the arm while her eyes seemed to snap with triumph. "They don't see angels often, in Satan's Own! He squirmed, but I made him pass through the fire. I am now the wife of Merced Monte. You can now do your part. But remember; I am *his* wife! Death alone can separate us!"

CHAPTER III.

GETTING AT IT.

NOBODY followed Canyon Clara from Satan's Own, therefore her meeting with the man in the velvet jacket was not seen.

When she had told him that she was now Merced Monte's wife and warned him that whatever he did, this fact should be borne in mind, he turned his face toward the mining-camp and gazed down the mountain.

"Did you see them all?" he suddenly asked.

"I am sure they are all there," was the answer. "They stood by during the marriage ceremony; they are my witnesses."

"By Jove! you played the game splendidly!" was the man's ejaculation. "We've got Merced Monte in a net from which there is no escape."

"I have never failed yet. I told you that I would force that Coeur d'Alene bully to make me his wife. Haven't I succeeded?"

"Admirably! You do not want me to forget what you have done, eh?"

"I do not. I have warned you, Velvet Van. Whatever you do, you are not to forget that I am the wife of Merced Monte. I saw Montana standing at his elbow before the ceremony was concluded; that is, I believe it was he. He was handsomer than Merced, had darker eyes, and longer hair."

"That was the far-famed Montana," exclaimed the man, his hands closing convulsively while he spoke. "Montana is cooler than Merced, but they are both devils enough."

"And you are not afraid to go down among them?"

Velvet Van laughed.

"Would I have come this far if I was afraid?" he demanded. "Four months ago, Fin Fin, my Chinese spy, entered Satan's Own and counted them all—the whole Desperate Dozen. He rode out of camp before Merced's pistol, and cursed the man for spoiling his poker game. But, good-by, Clara. You know when and where to meet me."

"If you come out of that camp alive."

"Oh, yes," laughed the man. "You must know that I have entered traps before."

"Yes, but then you had the Celestial with

you, and that Chinaman can shoot his way through California."

"He may not be far off now. He is one o' those friends who are always on hand and never caught asleep."

Velvet Van and Canyon Clara touched hands in the starlight, and the man rode slowly toward the camp which the woman had filled with excitement.

Meanwhile Merced Monte and Montana had retired to the latter's cabin, and sat at a little table with a tin lamp burning over their heads.

The former still exhibited traces of the excitement and mystery brought to camp by Canyon Clara.

"Don't I know that it means suthin'?" he repeated more than once to his partner. "What do you say, Montana? Shall I go?"

"To ther hidden camp—to Nora?"

"Yes."

"I don't know what ter say. Ef ye go, Merced, thar'll be somebody at yer heels."

"That woman, eh?" flashed Merced. "By heavens! I'll go for certain ef you'll insure her ter foller me! I want her on my trail. I'd give my hopes ov eternal bliss ter hev her at my heels so that I could make Merced Monte a widower!"

"You'd kill her, then?"

"Why not?" cried the desperado. "She's my wife now, but what ov that? It's a scheme ter git between me an' my ambition. She must know that Nora exists. By Jerusalem, Montana! I go to-night—jest ter get that mountain Cleopatra at my heels! I want her thar! I want ter turn an' show her that she made herself a tiger's wife ter-night! You will stay behind, Montana? Give me six days for the journey."

"What will you do?"

"Fetch Nora up hyer!"

"But you are Canyon Clara's husband." Merced Monte sprung up with an oath.

"I've got ter hev thet fact flung inter my teeth at every turn, hev I?" he cried. "I begin ter see through ther plan. She forced me inter ther marriage ter block my game with Nora. I go ter ther gold blossom, Montana. You must stay hyer an' set ther Desperate Dozen after her. This scheme consarns you as well as me. You mustn't forget that the Chinaman an' his velvet-coated pard ar' mixed up in ther scheme somehow."

"Do you think so?"

"I know it! So it is settled, then. I go ter Nora now!"

"To fetch her hyer?"

"Yes."

"An' you will be back inside ov six days?"

"I will, sure."

Monte buckled on a pair of heavy revolvers and walked toward the shanty door. Montana followed him with a singular gleam in his eyes.

"Be careful," he said, touching Merced's arm. "I don't think I'd bring Nora hyer."

"I shall. I want 'er whar I kin see her all ther time. You an' ther boys intend ter stand by me, Montana?"

"To ther death—no difference what you do!" was the quick response. "I have one request to make."

Merced stopped at the door, and looked into Montana's face.

"Wal, what is it, pard?" he asked.

"Don't kill your wife ef you find her on yer track," was the reply. "Let her develop her scheme. I want ter know what it means. I have a curiosity—"

"Thar," said Merced interruptingly. "I make no promises. I will submit ter no track-in' while I'm after Nora. Ef you want her plans ter grow, keep her from Merced Monte's heels!"

The bully of Satan's Own said no more, and the next moment Montana stood alone in the starlight with the sound of his pard's footsteps ringing in his ears.

"Woman an' gold," he muttered as he listened. "They'll be ther destruction ov ther Desperate Dozen!"

Turning on his heel, he walked among the cabins until he reached one which he entered and found a man there who greeted him with an exclamation.

"Wal, has the fool gone?" asked this person who was a little man with snake-like eyes and a scar over one eye.

"Who?—gone whar?" inquired Montana.

"Merced Monte—after the girl."

"How do you know?"

"Ha! ha! couldn't I see that he'd connect the visit ov the cool woman with the girl he's hid away to the South?" was the answer. "He's not too sharp for Owlet, Montana. He has gone to the girl; I know it; he will be followed by his new wife. Heavens! I nearly sprung out o' my boots when I saw her."

Montana could not repress a start.

"You've seen her afore, Owlet?" he said.

There was no reply, and the hand of Montana clutched the little man's arm.

"We ar' alone," he said, lowering his voice a trifle. "You have been all over the country, Owlet. You have played some desperate games. You have played 'em in California, in Colorado, on the Mississippi, in Texas, an'—"

Montana paused abruptly and looked into the eyes of the man before him.

"Go on," said Owlet with a grin. "While ye'r at it go through the hull catalogue."

"It is unnecessary. I couldn't count all your dark games in an hour. You know that you've buried yourself among these mountains ter escape an hundred avengers. You war at Mountain Meadows."

The eyes of Owlet suddenly flashed.

"An'so war you!" he hissed. "So was Merced Monte. We war all good Mormons then, eh, Montana? Throw one crime at my feet, an' bad as I am, I'll throw ten at yours! Shall we quit even, or do you want ter go on through the catalogue ov my good deeds?"

"We'll call it quits" said Montana with a faint smile.

"All right, but whenever you want ter open the case you'll find Owlet at yer service. Yes, ter be plain, I saw Merced's new wife afore ter night."

"Whar, Owlet?" cried Montana eagerly.

But the little man drew back like a serpent into his hole.

"Tell me. It need go no further. Merced is off for the South; he is out ov camp before this. Now who is that woman?"

"Canyon Clara."

"I know she calls herself that; but she has another name."

"Revolver Rosa, then."

"No more?"

"The Viper Queen."

"Is that all?"

"Crimson Crissie!"

"No, not that woman!" exclaimed Montana, springing up at mention of the last name.

"I ought ter know," said Owlet calmly as he looked across the table into the face of the astonished man. "Don't ask me why, but I ought ter know, I say."

Montana looked at the man as if he would like to tear the secret from him.

"One of her many names I have heard before" he said.

"Ter last one, eh?"

"Yes."

"That's ther name she war known by in Santa Fe."

"Yes, yes! I recollect," exclaimed the tough of Satan's Own. "Wait for me hyer, Owlet. When I come back I'll show you something."

A moment later Owlet was alone.

"I'll bet I kin guess what he'll fetch back," the man murmured. "I know as much about it as he does. Ah! hyer he comes."

Even as Owlet finished, the door opened and Montana sprung into the cabin.

"Read that," he exclaimed, throwing a piece of yellowish paper on the table. "That's a memento of the woman we've been talkin' about."

Owlet's long fingers picked it up and unfolded it. Then he spread it out before him and read as follows:

"To MONTANA:—I give you until tomorrow mornin' to quit Santa Fe forever! If you are here at daylight you will be buried before night. I don't want your cowardly blood now, so don't force me to spill it.

CRIMSON CRISSIE."

Montana watched Owlet like a hawk while he read, and when the little man looked up there was a smile at the corners of his mouth.

"Wal, you left?" he said in a comic manner, to Montana.

"Yes, I didn't want ter be shot down in the streets by a woman," was the reply while the Satan's Own rough bit his lips. "I went away."

"An' took yer life with you," was the retort. "Wal, you showed sense ther time, Montana. But how came you ter preserve this warnin' all this time?"

"In hopes ov meetin' ther Southern viper when I had the upper hand. I intended to roll it up an' shoot it through her from my revolver."

"You won't now, though. She is Merced's wife," laughed Owlet.

"Thar's no tellin' what I won't do ef I get a chance," snapped Montana madly. "I'd give all my earthly wealth ef I had known that the woman Gospel Noll war marryin' ter Merced war Crimson Crissie, ther Siren ov Santa Fe. Thanks for yer information, Owlet. I guess I'll turn hunter now."

"Beware ov Canyon Clara."

"To Tartarus with her!"

"Look out for Revolver Rosa."

"Satan take the witch!"

"Steer clear o' ther Viper Queen."

"Perdition gapes for her!"

"Don't fool with Crimson Crissie."

"I'd give ther world ef it war mine ter stand afore her! Good-night, Owlet. You're not in league with that woman? No! You know that ef you war, yer life wouldn't be safe ten minute's in Satan's Own. Let Merced go ter Nora. I hope his bride will come back with a new game. Show me the woman who made me leave Santa Fe!"

"You'll find her soon enough, fool ov Satan's Own," muttered Owlet under his breath, as Montana sprung across the threshold.

"Hello!" exclaimed a voice in the starlight,

ere the giant of the camp had gone ten steps from the cabin. "Is that you, Montana?"

"Yes, Crystal Jack."

"Wal, jes' come down ter Wisdom's, an' see ther g'loot that's landed in camp. I've heard ov sleek men afore, but this one discounts ther hull lay-out. Talk about Samson, Montana. Ther slayer ov ther Philistines hez come ter life, an' this time he's got himself up in buckskin an' velvet."

Montana started at the last sentence.

"In velvet, eh?" he cried.

"Yes, buckskin pants an' velvet jacket—a tiger in plush I'd call 'im."

"Come! Ter Wisdom's!" was the response, and the two men bounded away together.

Wisdom Bill kept the only stock of liquors that had ever found its way to Satan's Own, and when Montana and Crystal Jack reached the ranch, they saw a young man in velvet raise a barrel of whisky from the floor and carry it with ease to his lips.

"That's my Samson," said Crystal. "Jehu! ain't he a dandy?"

CHAPTER IV.

A LIVELY INTRODUCTION.

"Ef he isn't a reg'lar Samson, set this mountain g'loot down for a fool," continued Crystal Jack noticing the effect of the unwanted scene upon Montana. "He doesn't look like he could do it, but it never bothers him. Thet bar'l went up as though it war empty, an' I know it's full ov ther worst lightnin' juice that ever struck these diggin's."

The door of Wisdom Bill's shanty stood wide, so that Montana and his pard could see all that was happening inside. They saw the young athlete in the middle of the floor, and half surrounded by a crowd of bronze men who were gazing amazed at the feat of strength just displayed.

There were dozens of dark giants in Satan's Own, but not one would have staked an ounce of dust that he could perform the feat.

"When did he come?" asked Montana, advancing toward the whisky shanty.

"A while ago. We war discussin' that very act, when in he walked an' said quietly that it war no trick at all. Ther boys looked 'im over from head ter foot, an' said as how they reckoned that no galoot ov his size war equal ter ther task. Jehu! he walked behind ther counter, carried out that bar'l thar, an' toted it ter his head with no effort at all."

"What does he call himself?"

"I didn't stay ter hear 'im explain," answered Crystal Jack. "Leopard Lon whispered 'Go fer Montana,' an' off I put."

The foremost foot of the long-haired Apollo of Satan's Own had by this time touched the threshold of Wisdom Bill's ranch. The man in velvet had returned the barrel to the floor, and stood erect with a gleam of victory in a pair of coal-black eyes.

The next moment Montana was on the inside.

"Thar's ther best man in this camp!" exclaimed several men, looking at the new arrival. "Montana, thar, kin throw that bar'l over his head."

"An' ruin this pilgrim through the vale of tears? No, by Jerusalem! you don't experiment with my stock any longer!" broke in the genius of the place, and Wisdom Bill came from behind the counter amid the jeers and laughter of the crowd, and began to roll his moist goods to a place of safety.

A smile wreathed the lips of the man in the velvet jacket, but all the time from under his dark eyebrows he was eying Montana with no little curiosity.

"I make no pretensions, gentlemen," he said. "You get away with more whisky than that, but not all at once. Can any of you put a man into an empty barrel?"

"I'll furnish the bar'l fer that sport!" cried Wisdom Bill. "But I say it can't be done! Didn't I see Big Bill of Calaveras try ter put a half-grown Injun inter a bar'l once, an' fail? Lor! how ther young Digger did squirm! an' Bill had ter give it up."

"Roll out yer bar'l!" cried several voices. "Mebbe our friend hyer wants ter bet that he kin put a man inter it."

"Gentlemen, thar's a trick in it," was the reply. "Big Bill of Calaveras may have failed because he didn't go at it right. It's all in the knack of takin' your man."

"Whar's ther bar'l, Wisdom? Roll 'er out!"

Wisdom Bill was not long in fishing from beneath his short but deep counter a large barrel, which had been drained of its last drop of whisky.

Placing it on end in the middle of the floor, he knocked the head in with an ax, and turned upon the crowd.

"Thar's yer bar'l, gents. Now who goes inter it? I'll treat ther house if that man thar kin fill it, providin', ov course, that ther man ter be put in fights ter keep out."

From the moment of his entrance Montana had not ceased to regard the man in velvet. He saw before him a young man of not past twenty-eight, well molded, rather tall, and darkly handsome. He had had keen black eyes, and a pleasant countenance, and a pair of firm lips

were concealed by a black mustache that drooped gracefully over them.

He stood erect like a person confident of extraordinary powers. He seemed to feel that he could put any citizen of Satan's Own bodily into the barrel before him.

"See hyer, what's yer name, pard?" suddenly said one of the men.

"Velvet Van," was the answer.

"Then afore we proceed further with this sport, you must know Montana. I'll make yer acquainted. Captain Montana this is Velvet Van from—"

"From Nowhar," finished the Samson in plush as he stepped forward with hand thrown out to greet the Apollo of Satan's Own. "I believe we have never met before. Montana, eh? Glad to see you. I was just showin' the boys a trick or two."

The hands and the eyes of the two men met at the same time, and those who looked on must have seen that they could never become friends.

"Now fer ther bar'l trick," cried Wisdom Bill. "I want ter see that done. What Big Bill couldn't do with an Injun boy, no man kin do with a man. Montana thar ar' ther lion ov this camp an' while I don't throw discredit on his prowess, by Jupiter, I'll stake my dust that he can't put a squirm' youngster inter that liquor cage. No siree, gents! Trick er no trick, it can't be did!"

"Thet's disputin' yer assertion, Velvet," said several men looking at Velvet Van.

He stepped forward and then whirled suddenly upon Wisdom Bill.

"I guess you might as well explore your empty barrel as not," he suddenly exclaimed.

"Me! heavens, no!" exclaimed the man, slinking away. "I don't want ter try ther experiment myself. I war goin' ter suggest Crystal Jack thar. I—"

It was too late.

With good nature beaming in his eyes Velvet Van had covered the distance between him and the whisky-seller with a single stride, and the next instant Wisdom Bill was in his arms.

"Stand back!" vociferated several spectators.

"Give Velvet a fair shake. In yer go, Wisdom! Hooray for that treat yer promised!"

Wisdom Bill had determined that he would not be put into the barrel, but another person had resolved that he should fill it, and that very speedily.

The barkeeper kicked and squirmed with vigor, imitating no doubt the Indian whom Big Bill of Calaveras had failed to put into the barrel; but in the hands of Satan's Own's new visitor he had no chances.

It was certainly a ludicrous sight, but when Velvet Van stepped toward the waiting barrel the victory was won. All at once he doubled Wisdom Bill up in a manner marvelous to behold, and raising him on a level with his head, chucked him suddenly into the opening.

Wedged into the barrel, with nothing but head and heels visible, Wisdom Bill was anything but a beautiful picture.

"For Heaven's sake, gents, break that bar'l!" he called out in piteous tones. "My ribs hav been jammed inter my thighs, an' I hev'n got a hull bone left in my anatomy. Help me out, an' shoot that durned wizard from Nowhar. Oh-o-o! I'm a dyin' man—I am, by Jehu!"

Several men stepped forward.

"Let that man be!" suddenly exclaimed Velvet Van, with some show of sternness, though his eyes told that he did not intend that Wisdom Bill should be submitted to much torture. "The trick of the man in the barrel is, gentlemen, to drink at his expense before he gets out."

"Why didn't yer say so in ther first place?" groaned the imprisoned individual. "Take ther deadliest pil'zen in ther shop, an' be hangin' quick about it!"

A tall man sprung over the counter and set out the fiery fluid. There was a momentary gurgle of liquor, and then twenty glasses were emptied.

Velvet Van left his share untasted, and stepped toward Wisdom Bill with a smile at the corners of his mouth.

A minute later he released the red-faced bloviator, and the crowd roared when he was seen to straighten and help himself to a sample of the stuff he retailed for fifty cents a glass.

"No ribs protrudin' that I see. No spinal column out fer an airin'," said Crystal Jack. "You jes' fit in that bar'l, Wisdom."

"Mebbe I did, but I war on ther brink o' death while thar. Think ov a man with his hull anatomy compressed inter a bar'l! It's a blessed thing thar isn't a society for ther prevention ov cruelty in this camp."

"What's ther next trick?" cried a dozen men.

It was evident that Velvet Van had grown into the good graces of the toughs of Satan's Own. The Desperate Dozen stood before him with but a single exception—the man who had left camp on a certain mission only a short time previous to his arrival—Merced Monte.

The Cœur d'Alene tigers were in playful humor, and the man in buckskin and velvet had taken their good nature at its flood-tide.

"Show us another, sport. By Jove! we'll furnish ther material!" was the cry.

"Not from this part o' ther house," cried Wis-

dom Bill from behind his counter. "I feel as though I've been squeezed into a pistol bar'l."

"Oh! waft us a rest!" shouted Crystal Jack. "Velvet Van proposes ter throw yer through the roof an' catch yer on the outside."

"Not this night—some other eve," retorted Bill.

"Gentlemen, I have nothin' else to propose," said Velvet Van, quietly. "If I have amused you, I'm satisfied. I rather like this place. Satan's Own, you call it?"

"Yer bet yer boots, an' ther whitest place in the Cœur d'Alene kentry!"

"No hotel, eh?"

"No, but big hearts an' lots ov room."

Montana scowled at the last speaker, but the scowl did not silence him.

"I've heard of this camp. Big men, big hearts hyer I've been told. But I've heard of a decree which prevents you from havin' new citizens."

He looked at Montana as he spoke.

"That is true," said the long-haired sport. "We allow but fifty men hyer at one time."

"But you have but forty-nine now."

"How?"

"One man left camp as I came in. I might stay hyer till he returns when, accordin' ter the decree, I'd gently move on."

Montana did not know what to say.

What! let that man remain in Satan's Own till Merced Monte came back? Montana had already seen enough to know that the eyes which had sparkled with humor all the evening could flash with sternness as well. He believed, if his followers did not, that Velvet Van had come to Satan's Own with a well formed purpose of some kind.

"If he stays he'll get a foothold among the boys," Montana said to himself. "A man like that'd undermine an oath-bound brotherhood. By heavens! he mustn't stay hyer. Don't I see that he's a tiger in plush—a man whose hand, while it feels like silk, can kill all the same? He's got inter the boys already. They want him ter stay, an' it won't do for me ter drive 'im off ter night."

Montana had not mistaken the minds of the pards of Satan's Own. They were almost ready to break in upon the rigid decree; they liked the young Samson who seemed capable of inventing new forms of amusement.

"I'll see yer later," said Montana suddenly to Velvet Van. "The boys'll accommodate yer. We'll try ter make yer stay pleasant. Good-night." And out he went with a flash in his eyes that boded Velvet Van no good.

Once in the starlight, Montana half drew his revolver and turned savagely toward Wisdom Bill's shanty.

"No, not now. Let him show the hand he intends ter play," he said. "He'll do that soon ef he stays hyer. Whar's Owlet?"

"Hyer, Montana," said a voice at the desperado's elbow.

Montana turned and looked down into the face of the man who had told him about Canyon Clara.

"Wal, you've seen that man in thar?" said Montana nodding toward the saloon.

"Yes."

"How many names has he got?"

"As many as Canyon Clara. I b'lieve he goes her one better."

"Hades an' its master! Ther he's come hyer ter die!" was the response.

CHAPTER V.

THE YELLOW PARD COMES BACK.

The immediate result of Velvet Van's visit to Satan's Own was his acceptance of an invitation to spend the night in the cabin of a man named Dolores Dick.

This person was fully six feet tall, broad shouldered and bronzed, though strikingly good looking. He was not one of the Desperate Dozen, and his first duty was to tell Velvet Van about that strange and fearless organization.

To Dolores Dick's narration the new comer listened with a good deal of interest, asking no questions, and patiently hearing the mountain man through.

"Thar hev been twelve of 'em for years," Dolores Dick finished. "They bear charmed lives. Jes' think ov twelve men bein' hunted in Texas, in New Mexico, California, an' heaven knows whar else, an' yet all livin' ter-day! Thar's suthin' remarkable in that, I say; nothin' like it in this kentry. Do they stan' tergether? Jes' try 'em once. Insult one an' yer throw a challenge inter ther faces of all. But you kin make it hyer, Velvet. I know that already. You warn't in camp five minutes afore I knowned yer had a grip on the Dozen."

Velvet Van smiled faintly as he looked into the eyes of the speaker who sat across the table.

"Yes," he said to himself; "the grip I will get on this organization by an' by will not be relished by the parties gripped. I didn't expect the Dozen to fall in love with me, but I sha'n't prevent them—not for the present, at least."

"Ye'r goin' ter remain hyer?" asked Dolores, breaking in upon Velvet Van's thoughts.

"For a time."

"Till Merced Monte comes back, eh?"

"I don't know."

"You want ter see him. No man like Merced Monte in ther hull Cœur d'Lene region. By Jove! a woman got ahead ov 'im, though. She made him marry her at ther muzzle ov a dropper, an' ther mystery ov ther hull thing is, that Merced never saw'er afore ther ceremony. She must hev been a mountain crank; but, Jerusalem! she war a beauty."

"Did Merced go to hunt his wife?"

"I—I think not, but I don't know," was the answer. "I did not know he war gone till Montana mentioned it. You want ter see Merced Monte, I tell yer. He's ther captain ov ther Dozen, an' a better man never hunted men an' gold."

"What do you mean when you say a better man?" asked Velvet Van.

"A braver. He's a little superstitious, an' yer don't hev ter corner him ter make 'im fight. He war goin' ter shoot a Chinaman in camp hyer a few months ago, but the Celestial got away in time ter save his head. He would hev bored 'im through, Velvet. Thar's shoot in Merced Monte's eyes."

There was no answer. Velvet Van threw a glance at the cot in one corner of the cabin, and Dolores Dick, noticing the look, got up from the table.

"I'm goin' ter make ther night out with Sonoma Sam," he said. "Make yerself comfortable hyer, Velvet. Thar's ther cot an' ther usual pegs above it. Good-night, and pleasant dreams," and out Dolores Dick went, leaving the guest of the wild camp alone.

For a little while he sat at the table, then he hung the velvet jacket on a peg above the cot and threw himself down to rest.

It was rest, but not sleep, for the man who, in disobedience of the famous mandate had come to Satan's Own alone.

He let the lamp burn and lay awake with his eyes twinkling now and then, and as bright as ever. He was undoubtedly a man with a mission, for without one he would not have invaded the forbidden camp.

If he had followed Dolores Dick he would have seen that worthy enter a cabin where four men sat at a table playing cards.

"Hello! Dolores, whar's yer guest?" cried one of the quartette.

"In ther shanty. I left him ter go ter sleep. He kin hev ther hull bed ter-night. Boys, that man is a daisy."

"A daisy from Nowhar, I b'lieve," was the response.

"That's what he said at Wisdom Bill's."

"Is he goin' ter stay?" asked Sonoma Sam.

"Yes."

"Dolores, I want ter see yer. Come outside."

The two men walked out into the calm and beautiful starlight that fell softly upon the mountain camp.

"Dolores, you talked with him arter yer got ter yer shanty?" asked Sonoma Sam.

"Yes."

"On what subject?"

"On several. I told him about ther Dozen."

"An' he said—what?"

Struck by the speaker's eagerness, Dolores Dick turned and scrutinized his face.

"Trust me, Dolores," continued Sonoma Sam, layin' his hand upon Dick's arm. "You an' I ar' pards. When one fights both fight. Your foes ar' mine, my enemies yours; so with our friends, too. Now what did Velvet Van say when you told 'im about ther Dozen, includin' Merced an' Montana?"

"Not much. He gave me ter understand that he'd heard ov 'em afore."

"Didn't his eyes flash?"

"I can't say that they did, but I warn't lookin' inter them all ther time."

"Is he anxious ter stay hyer till Merced gets back?"

"If he is, he didn't show it."

"He's a strange—a very strange man," said Sonoma Sam, musing aloud, stared at by Dolores Dick who did not know what to make of him.

"Now by Jupiter! I'll put you on ther witness stan'!" exclaimed Dolores. "Hev you ever seen the camp's guest afore?"

"I must refuse ter answer that question," was the startling answer.

"To Dolores Dick?" cried the questioner in amazement.

"Even ter you, Dolores."

"Hang me, ef that's fair! But keep yer thoughts ter yerself, Sonoma. Remember that while Velvet Van's home is my shanty nobody shall touch him! He is my friend an' my guest. Who talks ag'in him hyer? Tell me that ef ye dare, Sonoma Sam. Is Velvet Van watched by any one?"

"I don't know how it is now," was the reply.

"How was it awhile ago?"

"I saw a black object crouched under yer one window," said Sonoma.

Dolores Dick starte' and let slip a mad exclamation.

"Name ther dog!" he cried.

"No; you'd raise a rumpus."

"By the eternal! I would! I don't allow listeners an' spies at my shanty. I don't b'long ter ther Desperate Dozen an' I don't fear it. A

spy! a man under my window? Call 'im out, Sonoma Sam."

But there was no reply.

"All right; keep ther secret, then," continued Dolores Dick. "It'll be a bad night for ther spy ef I catch 'im on duty—a mighty bad night. Sonoma. I'm ter stay with you ter-night, yer know?"

"Yes, but you'd better stay with yer guest."

"Tell me why."

"No. Go back an' guard the man who chuck'd Wisdom Bill inter his own bar'l."

"It eouchers my hand! it scoops this mountain gopher," cried Dolores. "I go back Sonoma. You send me away, but half guarded."

"I can't help it. Go an' watch. Velvet Van has in this camp the bitterest enemies a man ever had."

Dolores Dick turned away with a muttered oath.

"I never saw Sonoma act ther way afore," he said. "He wants ter be mysterious, an' he would impress me with ther notion that ther man from Nowhar is in danger. Who wants his blood? who wants ter rob him? Woe ter ther spy under my window ef I catch 'im thar!"

The speaker walked back toward his cabin while Sonoma Sam turned into the one where he had left the players.

Dolores Dick reached the vicinity of his shanty without incident, and noiselessly opened the door which was not locked.

The tin lamp hanging against the log burned dimly shedding a weird light about the apartment.

The corner in which the cot was, was dark but not too dark to prevent Dolores from seeing the figure of a human being stretched out upon it. He also heard the faint breathing of one asleep.

"He's all right so far," said the big miner drawing back without a sound. "My guest is still in my cabin, an' woe ter ther galoot who disturbs his slumbers! Thar's a man in camp named Dolores Dick—a nugget from Nugget Bend. He stands by Velvet Van whom he never saw afore ter-night."

Not far from the cabin grew a tree, the only one spared by the settlers' ax in that portion of the camp, and Dolores Dick soon stood under its branches, with his eyes fixed upon the cabin.

An hour passed, and then the keen-eyed sentry saw an object creeping toward the cabin door.

"Sonoma Sam war right," he ejaculated, leaning forward with a cocked revolver in his hand. "Velvet Van needed watchin'. That's ther spy comin' back—that's ther infernal rascal what Sonoma saw under my window."

Three strides carried Dolores Dick almost to the very door of the shanty, and, when he paused, he looked down upon a human figure crouched at the threshold.

The next moment the hand of the night prowler pushed the door open, and darted inside before Dolores could interfere.

"Jerusalem! quicker nor lightnin'!" cried the miner. "You'll come out o' that shanty in a hurry, I tell yer, spy!"

In another instant Dolores Dick was at the door himself. He leaped across the threshold and into the cabin with a mad ejaculation bubbling to his lips.

What did he see in the light of the lamp? A figure bending over Velvet Van on the cot. Quick as a tiger Dolores Dick leaped at the crouching object, and his big bronzed hand swooped down upon it.

"See hyer! this is my shanty!" he cried. "By Jehosaphat! you play spy in the wrong diggin's when you come hyer."

He held the spy in his hands, which had a terrible grip.

"Fer a cent I'd choke yer ter death!" he went on. "Sonoma saw yer under my window awhile ago. Who's yer master?"

"Helpie! helpie!" came from the throat of the person writhing in Dolores's grip.

The man on the cot leaped up. In the dim light he seemed to take in the whole situation at a glance.

"I've caught ther varmint!" said Dolores, holding the spy up before Velvet Van. "Look 'im through while I choke 'im."

"No! heavens! you choke a friend!" exclaimed the man from Nowhar. "Give him to me."

"Thar he is!" and the half-choked being dropped suddenly from Dolores's grip. "Hang me ef it isn't a yaller seraph—ther one mebbe what rode out o' camp last spring ahead ov Merced Monte's revolver."

The captured prowler was a Chinaman, with a stout figure, and the blackest eyes that ever shone in a human head.

He glided to Velvet Van's side and halted there, with a long-bladed bowie in his right hand and with his eyes fixed tigerishly upon Dolores Dick. Once he glanced up at the owner of the velvet jacket for permission to hurl himself upon the man who had choked him.

"Wal, it scoops me!" continued Dolores. "Thet yeller seraph yer friend, Velvet? He is ther one Merced wanted ter shoot."

"Merced no shootee Fin Fin, though," laughed the Celestial, showing his teeth. "Melican man heapee on shootee here."

The Desperate Dozen.

"You kin stake yer dust on that, Chinee," said Dolores. "Satan's Own is a bad place for almond eyes."

"Fin Fin stayee maybe," was the answer. "Velvet Van wantee him here perhaps."

Dolores Dick threw a glance toward the man from Nowhar.

"I answer for this man," said Velvet Van. "We ar' friends. Woe to the man who lifts a hand against him. He came here to see me, Dolores—not to harm a single citizen of Satan's Own. I told him to stay away; but that makes no difference. If you will retire for a moment, he will go as peaceably as he came."

"All right. Keep him hyer an hour ef yer want ter, Velvet," said Dolores, withdrawing toward the door. "But that man's life isn't safe hyer."

Dolores Dick retired from the cabin and left Velvet Van and the Chinaman alone.

Ten minutes later the big miner saw the Celestial come out alone.

"Now make yerself scarce," murmured Dolores. "A scheme ov some kind 's in the wind; I know it. It'll involve me, fer I'm housin' the man from Nowhar—ther man whose pard is a Chinaman!"

He saw the yellow sport pass out of sight, and then heard the sharp report of a revolver.

"Jes' ez I expected!" cried Dolores.

The next second the cabin door flew open, and Velvet Van sprung into the starlight.

"What meant that shot?" he exclaimed.

"Don't yer know?" cried Dolores. "It war ther death-warrant ov yer yaller pard!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE DECREE TO LEAVE.

"THET'S but ther beginnin'. He'll make ther endin', ef he stays hyer!"

The man who spoke thus walked rather rapidly through a part of Satan's Own with a revolver in his hand.

"Hang me, ef I wait till Merced comes back! It won't do. Velvet Van an' ther almond-eyed skunk ar' pards, an' that's all I want ter know. I hope he heard ther crack ov my dropper. When he stands over ther yaller victim, he'll probably know that somebody's gettin' onter him. It is Montana—one o' ther Desperate Dozen. Let ther man from Nowhar look out!"

The speaker of these warning words pursued his way until he entered a cabin, where he deposited his revolver on a table, and sat down at it in the light of a lamp.

It was the long-haired Apollo of the mountain camp—Montana, the friend and pard of Merced Monte.

"It was a snap-shot, but I don't often fail," he went on, glancing toward the door as if he expected some one to enter. "I ought ter be able ter drop a Chinaman at ten yards. He fell, anyhow—went down in his shoes an' never kicked. I believe in takin' bulls by ther horns. If Merced hed been hyer when ther g'loot from Nowhar struck camp, that'd be blood-stains on Wisdom Bill's planks ter-night."

Nobody dropped in to disturb Montana's meditations. He talked half-aloud to himself while he waited, with one of his big bronzed hands resting near the deadly pistol.

His eyes seemed to say that he was eager for somebody to come, and an enemy at that. His look was a challenge.

Out in the starlight his revolver had dropped a specimen of that race so cordially hated in the far West and on the Pacific coast.

For Montana to see the Celestial in Satan's Own was to shoot him down.

Fin Fin had come to the camp at a bad time for his own welfare. True he had found Velvet Van, his pard, to whom he had delivered a message of some kind, but in leaving the town he had revealed himself to Montana—a cool head, who hated everybody with almond eyes and a yellow skin.

Montana more than half-expected to see the door of his cabin open and the figure of Velvet Van stand before him.

"If he comes, we'll fetch things to a crisis right away," he said, as he savagely eyed the door. "He will guess who dropped his pard when he finds him. I hope he'll come straight hyer. We don't want him in camp when Merced comes back with the hidden girl."

Another half hour passed.

"Thunders!" ejaculated Montana, springing up. "Didn't he investigate my shot? He warn't asleep when I touched ther trigger. No! ther rat-eater came straight from him."

Surprised by the silence that had greeted his action, the rough of Satan's Own went out. The camp was quiet.

"I won't b'lieve it till I see for myself," he muttered starting off.

A minute later he reached the spot where he had seen the Chinaman drop at the crack of his revolver.

"Jerusalem! that's nothin' hyer—not ther sign ov a dead Celestial!" he ejaculated. "Ho hit ther ground whar I stand—I saw 'im. I never hev ter shoot twice; it's not my style."

Certain it was that the long-haired sport's victim was not where he had fallen.

Montana looked down amazed.

All at once he stooped and began to examine the spot in the light of the stars.

"He left his measure in ther dust, but that's all that's hyer!" he exclaimed. "Didn't I settle with him? Hev I for ther first time failed ter finish ther man on whom I pulled trigger? Thunder an' hades! I'll track ther yaller spider down ter-night."

Montana got up and turned toward the suburbs of the camp.

"Mebbe you'd better not," said a cautious voice at his elbow.

Montana wheeled at the sound and looked down into the face of Crystal Jack.

"What do you know?" demanded the big sport.

"Nothin' much, Montana, only that mebbe you'd better go slow," was the reply.

"Go slow in Satan's Own?" laughed Montana. "I guess I've got a right ter regulate my movements, eh, Crystal?"

"You're boss, so I won't be adviser. He isn't whar yer left him, I see."

Montana threw a quick glance to the ground at his feet.

"You know then, Jack!"

"I know that you pulled trigger on the Chinee."

"Who carried 'im off?"

"Nobody. He got up ov his own accord an' walked away."

"Ther—devil!" cried Montana.

"He did nothin' less than that," continued Crystal Jack. "An' the strangest part ov ther hull thing is that he didn't appear ter be the least hurt."

"Didn't he stagger?"

"Nary stagger."

Montana looked at Crystal Jack for several moments in an incredulous manner; then he raised the heavy revolver with which he had done the shooting and held it before Jack's eyes while he went on:

"It war with this, Crystal, an' at ten paces. I fired straight at ther yaller hound's breast. I had a fair shot, an' when ther trigger moved, Jehul! how he dropped!"

"Wal he got up an' walked off apparently not in ther least winged," was the response.

"Which way did he go?"

"He went in that direction," and Crystal Jack pointed toward the mountain.

Montana started forward, but the hand of his friend dropped instantly upon his arm.

"Mebbe you'd better not—not ter-night," said Crystal Jack, as the eyes of the two men met.

"Because ther rat-eater is alive?—because I've got his blood hot an' a tiger ag'in' me? Is this why I'd better not, Crystal?"

"That's one reason. You know that the other man is still in camp."

"Velvet Van? Yes! They ar' pards—he an' that almond-eyed rattler. Ther one came hyer ter see ther other; they must hev met at Dolores Dick's shanty. Is Dick in league with 'em, too?"

"Do you think that's a league, Montana?"

"Thet's jes' what exists ter-day," was the quick reply. "I'm goin' ter take up ther threads one by one, an' that afore Merced Monte gets back. Thar's more in ther league than Velvet Van an' ther Chinaman. You know what I saw in ther mountain shortly after ther strange woman hed forced Merced ter marry her—ther Man from Nowhar an' ther woman tergether! Now tell me that's no league, Crystal."

"It looks like it," admitted Crystal Jack.

"Ter-night he comes alone ter Satan's Own, tries ter get in with ther boys by doin' some tricks at Wisdom Bill's, an' goes down ter Dolores Dick's shanty by invitation. By an' by ther Chinaman comes along—ther same one Merced Monte sent out ov camp last spring at ther muzzle ov his revolver. Tell me that's not a put-up job at work, Crystal; say that's no cold deck in Velvet Van's hands. I know better."

Crystal Jack made no reply.

"What do you think?" suddenly continued Montana: "Did he get in with ther Dozen ter-night?"

"He did ter some extent."

"Only fer ther time, eh?"

"I don't know," said Crystal Jack, doubtfully. "I heard Pedro Pete say that he could stay hyer jes' as long ez he pleased, an' Coyote Chick sanctioned him by sayin', 'Bet yer life!'"

Montana ground his teeth.

"They know ther oath ov ther Dozen," he said. "They've not forgotten ther decree?"

"I think not."

"By ther eternal! I say that Velvet Van sha'n't stay hyer ez long ez he pleases. What ef he should please ter stay hyer till Merced come back with—"

Montana checked himself and tried to avoid Crystal Jack's gaze.

A singular light appeared in the pard's eyes.

"He sha'n't stay—that's all!" Montana went on with resolution. "The camp ain't safe with that man in it. The decree has ter be stuck ter. Why delay ther service another day?—why not serve it now?"

"Ter-night?"

"Right away! Will you do Montana a service, Crystal?"

"Try me, captain."

"Then bring all ther Dozen hyer, but Coyote an' Pedro. Find 'em silently an' without excitin' any suspicion. Say to 'em, 'Montana—the decree, an' tell 'em whar I am. You heard nobody else say that he should stay but Coyote an' Pedro?"

"No."

"All right. Tell ther rest ov ther Dozen. I await them hyer."

Crystal Jack stole away and left Montana alone in the starlight.

"I'll kill ther snake by breakin' ther egg afore it's hatched," he growled. "Our man is at Dolores's cabin; an' we'll serve ther notice on 'im right away. As for that Chinaman, I'll bore his head ther next time!"

The long-haired sport of Satan's Own did not have to wait long for the results of Crystal Jack's mission. Man after man joined him until when Jack himself came back he was surrounded by eight stalwart fellows desperate enough to do anything. Coyote Chick and Pedro Pete had been left back.

"Ther one great decree ov this camp must be served at once," said Montana. "Thar's a league ag'in' us an' ther man now in Dolores Dick's cabin is at ther head ov ther same. United we stand, pards, divided we drop in our boots. Ther safety ov Satan's Own demands Velvet Van's absence from camp. It must not be ter-morrow or next day; it must be now."

Several men responded "all right, captain," but for the most part, the crowd was silent.

Montana threw a swift inquiring glance at Crystal Jack. Had the man from Nowhar made friends with more than two of the famous twelve?

"Come! I'll serve ther notice," continued Montana. "You will stand by me for ther honor ov Satan's Own. By heavens! I'll serve it ef I hev ter go alone."

He started off and a glance over his shoulder told him that the gang was at his back.

"I'll show him that we've got a deck that discounts any that he kin set up," said Montana to Crystal Jack at his side. "Nine ag'in' one isn't givin' ther lone man much show, but by ther eternal, he doesn't deserve any."

It was a short tramp to the cabin owned by Dolores Dick, and Montana walked straight to the narrow door with his revolver clutched in his dark hand.

About ten feet from the shanty he halted and turned to his followers.

"Remember," he whispered, "whatever his plea may be, it's ter weigh ez nothin' for him. He leaves Satan's Own to-night alive, if he obeys ther decree—dead ef he laughs at it!"

Montana did not wait for any response, but stepped toward the door again.

"I'll fetch 'im out now," he murmured.

The next moment he almost recoiled, for the cabin door flew open, and there stepped into the starlight Velvet Van with his arms folded on his breast!

"I suppose you ar' visitin' me," he said with a smile, driving a look straight into Montana's face. "Well, gentlemen, hyer I am."

For a moment the nine men stared at him in speechless amazement. His very coolness seemed to win their admiration.

"Yes," suddenly said Montana, "we've come ter see you. Thar's a decree that forces us hyer. It is that Satan's Own shall hev no new inhabitants without the consent ov a majority ov its council. Ther majority is hyer; ther decree must be carried out. Right away!"

Montana thought that he had said enough, and he had given to the two last words an emphasis that admitted of no misunderstanding.

"Gentlemen, I came hyer ter see life in Satan's Own," said Velvet Van. "I acknowledge the authority of no decree so long as I disturb nobody."

"Then you won't obey ther one passed in this camp?"

"I will leave Satan's Own in a few hours."

"Ther decree—ther pards behind—me—say now," flashed Montana.

"What if I should refuse point-blank ter obey it?" asked the man from Nowhar.

"You'll hev ter take ther consequences."

"All right. I'll take 'em!" said Velvet Van, with a chuckle, and turning on his heel, he walked back into the cabin and shut the door in the desperadoes' faces!

CHAPTER VII.

HARD TO DRIVE.

MONTANA seemed ready to burst from suppressed rage.

He threw a mad look at the closed door and for a moment seemed about to throw himself against it with the force of a tiger. The very coolness of the Man from Nowhar burned in his soul like a red-hot iron.

"That beats anything I've ever seen," he managed to hiss to the man at his back. "Thar's ther first man ter laugh at ther famous decree ov Satan's Own. In thar he stands, chucklin' yet. He says he'll take ther consequences; wal, let him take 'em!"

If Montana had looked beyond the threshold of Dolores Dick's cabin at that moment he would

have seen its most prominent tenant standing erect with his bold and handsome face turned toward the door, ready for anything that might turn up.

Looking at him from a few feet away was Dolores Dick, and the eyes of the miner were full of astonishment.

"Thet stillness out thar 'll go ag'in' ye," said Dolores, gliding suddenly to Velvet Van's side. "I thought ye hed got a grip on ther Dozen, but it seems not. They're all out thar but three, an' one ov them is Merced who isn't in camp. You kin git out o' ther shanty by goin' up ter ther loft thar an' liftin' ther clapboards."

The eyes of The Man from Nowhar instantly flashed:

"When I go out it'll be by the door," Dolores heard him say. "They've tried their manifesto on me. Dolores, that's all. I knew all about it before I ever set foot in Satan's Own. I came hyer regardless ov it. I told Montana that I'd take the consequences ov my disobedience ov the mandate, an' I'm hyer ter take 'em. Let 'em come."

He seemed to increase an inch in stature as he turned from Dolores Dick, and watched the door with some eagerness mingled with the nerve that had astonished the crowd outside.

The lamps hanging along the logs showed his splendid physique to Dolores.

"Jehosaphat!" ejaculated the miner. "Ef any one man kin hold ther Desperate Dozen level, thar he stands."

All at once a knock was heard at the door.

"Hello in thar!" said a voice undoubtedly Montana's. "Ar' ye still willin' ter take ther consequences, Velvet?"

"Why not?" laughed the man in velvet. "I came hyer alone. I have spilled no blood unless I drew a few drops when I cracked Wisdom Bill into his whisky bar'l. You don't call me ter account for that, eh?"

"Nol" cried Montana. "We hev decided thar decree so long kept in Satan's Own must be obeyed—that's all."

"Oho! Very well! Carry it into effect, then. I am hyer, gentlemen. If I had been let alone, to-morrow's sun would not hev seen me hyer."

"It was no sure thing, then?"

"Not exactly," answered Velvet Van, stepping before the Dozen so abruptly that Montana suddenly recoiled. "You came for me," he went on. "You throw at me a decree which says that no stranger shall remain an hour in this camp. You men have good reasons for passin' such an order. If I war you I'd hate strangers, too. You, Montana—as men call you—if I war you, I'd fence this camp in, an' kill the first human bein' what looked over it."

"What do you know?" cried the long-haired sport.

"Nothin', only that I'm ordered ter leave Satan's Own! Isn't that enough for me ter know for ther present?"

"Yes! You tried ter ketch ther boys with yer tricks," was the answer. "Ther two-bar'l tricks failed, though. I've got ther Dozen at my back, yer see. Thar's nothin' at yers, Velvet Van, but a cabin that wouldn't hold yer ten minutes if we said so. We've concluded ter give yer five minutes in which ter quit ther camp."

"Five minutes!" came rippling over the stranger's lips.

"Thet's longer time than we usually give visitors. We hold ther best hand, yer see—a hand thar kin beat a cold deck any time. If yer think ter stay hyer till—"

Montana stopped as if he had caught himself on the threshold of a secret.

"Till Merced, your pard, comes back, eh, Montana?" smiled the man from Nowhar. "Wasn't thet the way you war goin' ter finish your sentence? Merced went south, didn't he—not on his weddin'-tour, ha! ha!"

"No, but if he finds the Cleopatra thar forced him inter marriage at ther revolver's muzzle, she'll cash her life's checks at death's counter!" was the flashed rejoinder. "She is but a part ov ther web certain parties hev lately spun; ther drama she played in this camp b'longs ter ther one thar brought you among us. You daren't deny thar, Velvet Van. We are no fools of we ar' fenced in by everlastin' hills. But enough! I don't take ther time I hev wasted from yer five minutes. I'll be generous, Velvet. This is a game 'twixt man an' man. Yer time begins now; thar's ther trail! Foller it either way an' ye'll strike ther mountains."

Montana stepped back and looked at the man before him.

Dolores Dick stood just inside the door breathless and full of anxiety. Hanging from one of his hands was a huge revolver and his eyes glancing beyond the door, open an inch, watched the stalwart characters standing in the soft rich starlight.

"I'll hev a hand in thar myself," suddenly cried a loud voice, and there landed almost between Velvet Van and Montana the figure of Wisdom Bill, the proprietor of the camp's whisky-trap. "He's ther g'loot what jammed me inter a bar'l at ther expense ov my spinal machinery, ter say nothin' ov my ribs. Goin' ter send 'im adrift, eh? It's all right, but I want vengeance first."

Montana's arm and half a dozen others reached out for the rantankerous William, but he drew back out of reach, and unfortunately for him within sweep of Velvet Van's hand.

"Want revenge, do you?" said the Man from Nowhar as his hand dropped velvet-like upon Wisdom Bill's shoulder, and closed there instantly. "From yer remarks I infer that I'm the individual you're lookin' for."

"Jehu! don't crush my shoulder!" roared Wisdom Bill, trying to free himself from the grasp that had tightened like a vise. "Give a gent'leman a chance ter defend himself. For Heaven's sake, Velvet—I—Jerusalem! Let up! Thet's my flesh!"

A quiet smile stole over the face of Velvet Van, then suddenly seizing Wisdom Bill by the remaining shoulder, he flung him ten feet away, and had straightened when Montana stepped forward for the purpose of taking advantage of the feat.

"I am at the service of any man in Satan's Own," he said. "Gentlemen, I go away—if I go at all—to-night at the muzzle of the revolver. If blood is to precede my departure you hev but to lift the hands that now hang at yer sides. You see I am not unarmed. I came hyer ter-night for no blood, but I'll be square an' say to you, Montana, thar's no tellin' what'll happen hyer by an' by. If I go I'll leave no promise behind. Keep yer decree for other people—for women an' the heathen Chinee. This camp is hardly six months old. It has no graveyard, I understand. Ther startin' ov one ter-night lies with you, pards ov Satan's Own."

He stopped and stepped aside. The five minutes had expired.

"Let 'im stay—let 'im see daylight," said voices at Montana's side. "Heavens! he armed himself when he threw Wisdom Bill from him. Don't push him ter ther wall now. Remember: this is Satan's Own. What's one man ter all ov us?"

Montana bit his lip. What! let that cool head from Nowhar back him down now?

"We'll corral 'im to-morrer, cap'n," continued the voices. "Ter-morrer we'll enforce ther decree if it takes every human life in camp. Give him ther halter till then."

"Hades! you don't want ter help me!" growled Montana. "I guess he got inter more hearts than Coyote an' Pedro's. I'll give him string till daylight, then, by the souls ov my dead! I'll lift his brains ter ther sun, if he laughs at the mandate."

With the last word he threw a fierce look toward Velvet Van.

"Stay an' take ther consequences," he cried. "The sun will soon come up. You hev brought yer life ter Satan's Own. You may leave it hyer."

He waited for no reply, but whirled madly as he sent the last word arrow-like at the man who stood ten feet away, and said "Come!" in fierce undertones to his crowd.

A moment later Montana and the gang were tramping from the spot, leaving Velvet Van behind with a calm but triumphant smile on his lips. He watched them depart followed moodily by the man he had just flung away, and when their forms had vanished, he turned to the cabin again.

Dolores Dick met him with a wondering look as he crossed the threshold.

"So this is Satan's Own, eh?" said Velvet Van. "It isn't as lively ez I've been told it war. They said men would shoot at ther drop ov a hat hyer."

"They will!" said Dolores.

"Well, thar's no dead men about yet," laughed the man from Nowhar. "I guess I'll stay."

Dolores Dick could not suppress the stare that replied to the last sentence.

"They want daylight for it," he said. "I am yer friend, Velvet: I don't want ter see yer fight Coeur d'Lene's infernal Dozen. Take ther advice ov Dolores Dick who knows Montana an' ther pards thar back 'im. Though it war one ag'in' nine, you had ther call on 'em an' they knew it. To-morrer they'll enforce ther mandate."

"Ag'in' me, eh?"

"Yes."

"An' you think I've no show hyer?"

"No more than a kitten hez in Tartarus without claws. I don't know what brought yer ter Satan's Own. I reckon it's none ov my bizness. If you've got a game you want ter win, git out ov this camp afore sunrise."

"I shall stay," was the answer. "Dolores, I don't want you to stand by me. I don't want help. I've met men before. Satan's Own is no worse than places I have already struck. Yes, I'm playin' a game, an' when I lay the last card down it'll be as the winner. Don't risk yer life for me. I won't stand it. I am goin' to remain in this camp till Merced Monte comes back, an' until some one else comes also. The mandate will not be carried out to-morrow. I'll bet my life on that. I am stronger here than I was an hour ago. I know it. Go ter bed, Dolores, I am goin' ter stay."

Dolores's answer was one muttered word:

"Fool!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MYSTERY OF DIRKTOWN.

MEANWHILE, the man well mounted and riding in a southerly direction from Satan's Own was Merced Monte, one of the most prominent characters of the Coeur d'Alene country.

We know that he left the camp for the purpose of bringing to it a person called Nora, and that he was resolved to deal terribly with the woman who had forced him into a marriage at the pistol's muzzle.

He had not the least idea who that woman was.

She had come to Satan's Own unheralded, but well mounted and well armed; she had invaded the camp with a resolute purpose which, when she had carried it out, had kindled her dark eyes with intense satisfaction.

Merced Monte could not keep Canyon Clara out of his mind, as he pushed over the mountain trail. He went back over his life, and called up all the women he had met, but he could not recognize his wife.

"It's a mystery which I'd like ter fathom," he exclaimed. "Her comin' ter Satan's Own an' ther weddin' reads like it war got up fer a novel, but hang it all! it's romance in real life, an' I'm ther victim. Let her foller me, as Montana intimated she might! Just let that wife o' mine throw herself on my trail an' I'll get at ther bottom ov ther mystery ef thar haster be some first class chokin'!"

If Merced had known that the man from Nowhar had come to Satan's Own he might have turned back, but as this knowledge was not his, he kept on, lengthening the distance between him and the desperadoes' camp.

He had not ridden rapidly all the time, as if he was in no great haste to reach his destination. At times and for miles his horse hardly left a walk.

The night wore off and the morning found Merced in one of the wildest portions of the Coeur d'Alene mountains still pressing on and tired of his night in the saddle.

He had ascended to the elevated trails and from them caught glimpses of the wonderful region lying below.

All at once he pulled in his horse and looked back over the country he had traversed since dawn.

"My eyes don't often deceive me," he said aloud to himself. "What did Montana say when I left him? 'Keep an eye on ther back track, Merced.' I saw a figure down thar, but I don't see it now. Have I been followed all night? Is the woman who calls herself Merced Monte's wife on my trail?"

There was something exciting in the thought that he was followed by a foe of some kind. He knew that Canyon Clara loved him not, that she had forced him into a marriage for a purpose not yet developed.

Had she followed him?

The thought forced a curse across his lips. Woe to the woman who had done this thing!

For twenty minutes Merced Monte's steed did not move. He sat in the saddle gazing back over the trail where he was certain he had caught sight of a moving figure. His eyes flashed, and his teeth met firmly.

At last he moved forward again, but every now and then he threw sharp glances over his shoulder.

"I've been tracked afore, but thar's no livin' person ter boast ov ther exploit," he said. "I've been hunted by red an' white, by lassoer an' Mexican, but I'm the sole survivor ov ther incidents. All right, my daisy bride. Ther way ter dissolve ther marriage bonds is ter foller Merced Monte!"

He laughed at his words, touched his tireless steed with the spur that glittered at his heel, and went down the trail in a swinging gallop.

All that day he rode as if his journey was to end among the rich haciendas of the South. He met no one, and the trail he kept seemed one with which he was familiar.

His glances back revealed no one. He might have been mistaken, but the eyes that burned in Merced Monte's head never deceived their owner.

At last an exclamation of pleasure burst from his lips:

"Dirktown! Now I shall see the blossom of all this kentry—the rose worth her weight in diamonds!"

He almost drew rein to look down upon the collection of rough shanties that lay at his feet. He might have counted them on his bronzed fingers; they were all alike, and close together.

The sun was throwing his last beams when Merced Monte rode into the little place which had never been accorded a place on any map, yet made of the wild Northwest. Nobody came out of the cabins to greet him; he saw no dark-shirted men gambling in the waning sunlight; the place had a strange desolate look.

"My God! they hevn't vamosed ther mountain ranch, eh?" ejaculated Merced when he found himself in the center of the town. "True, I hevn't been hyer in six months, but I hed confidence in ther pards. But now Dirktown looks like ther home ov owls only. Whar ar' ther boys?"

The Desperate Dozen.

He was on the ground before the last word had left his tongue.

"Hello! I'm back! Whar ar' ye, pard's ov Dirkton?" he cried in a loud voice.

Waiting for no response, Merced Monte leaped to one of the cabins and threw open the door. It was empty.

He went to another and another with the same result. Not a living inhabitant greeted him.

A wild light came gradually into his eyes. He looked like a man who had been betrayed. At last he came to a cabin the door of which did not yield to his hand. It appeared to be fastened from the inside.

Merced Monte stepped back and looked at the cabin for a moment.

"The solution of the mystery is in thar," he said. "I kin find out what has become ov Nora by openin' thet door."

He drew his stalwart figure up, and dashed at the portal. It cracked before the charge and yielded at the second assault.

Merced Monte went headlong into the cabin and fell against an object that made him recoil with an exclamation of horror.

The open door let some light into the hut, and partially revealed the dark corners.

But on the floor at the desperado's feet lay the half decomposed corpse of a young girl! The hands had been crossed upon the breast, and the body arranged for burial, but the face had no expression, the eyes had lost even the ghastly stare of death.

"More than a week dead!" cried Merced. "I've come too late for her. The land ov that mountain Cleopatra is in this! But what took the men ov Dirkton off? I thought money couldn't buy them. They war my friends. I could depend on such men as Jaguar Joe an' Eagle Eph in days gone by, but they're not hyer now. They even left Nora unburied. Thar shall come from my hands for this a day ov reckonin'!"

He could not keep his eyes from the corpse before him.

"I came hyer for this!—I rode all ther way from Satan's Own, probably tracked, ter find Dirkton deserted an' ther blossom dead!"

He went to the door as he finished, and looked out. Night was settling down over the place once more.

"Didn't they leave nothin' behind?" he cried. "Didn't Joe leave me a word if I should come?—no letter, not even a line?"

He bunched some matches and turned back into the cabin. While they burned he gave it a thorough overhauling and discovered nothing.

"Joe's cabin! I did not examine it," he suddenly exclaimed, and the next moment he had pushed open the door of a shanty that stood near the one that held the dead.

In this cabin was a rough deal table and several three-legged stools, disposed about it in a manner which told him that a conference was the last scene it had witnessed.

On the table itself lay a piece of paper weighted down by a bowie that had a broken point.

Merced Monte pounced upon the paper like a tiger the moment his eyes fell upon it.

"Suthin'—but mebbe durned little," he said, as he went into the fading light of day with the "find" clutched in his hand.

Unfolding the paper, he attempted to make out the lines jumbled together, and all at once he gave it up with an oath.

"A crazy man did this!" he cried. "This isn't Joe's work, nor Eagle Eph's. Those lines try ter lay out a route, ef they warn't written ter deepen ther mystery an' ter hoodwink me. Hello! what's this?—two figgers an' ther letter J; tellin' me nothin', unless 'J' stands for Joe. I'm scooped. Dirkton deserted, Nugget Nora dead! Whar's my scheme now? I've got ter carve a new one out. By ther eternal Heavens! I'll do it!"

With the paper crushed in his hand, Merced Monte went back to the hut where the dead lay.

He looked in, grated his teeth, and turned away.

"Why not?" he suddenly said aloud. "Why not finish ther hull thing with ther match? I hevn't time ter plant Nora, an' ef they see ther light, they'll know that a devil hez come to Dirkton!"

Ten minutes later Merced Monte with the dark face of a desperado, emerged from a certain cabin. The interior was seen by a bright red light, and he carried a torch in his right hand.

Cabin after cabin he visited, and when he quitted them there was always fire behind. In a very short time the whole place was wrapped in flames, and not far away stood Merced Monte leaning against his horse with his eyes fastened on the sight.

"By heavens! I'd almost give my neck ter get at ther bottom ov this!" he exclaimed. "What made Nora die afore I came, an' why did I find Dirkton deserted? Wal, I kin go back ter Satan's Own, an' report; then I kin turn on all whose hands ar' in this devilish game. Jerusalem! won't we make things spin along ther line?"

The fire seemed to delight the big sport, for he did not leave his position until the last roof had fallen in.

"Now for a red game!" he cried, reseating himself in the saddle. "Some people forget that Merced Monte is a livin' king in the Cœur d'Lene kentry!"

He was about to ride from the spot when something flying past his face alighted on the ground.

"A letter tied to a stone!" he cried, springing from the horse and seizing the object which he had rightly named.

Around a stone almost as large as his fist a piece of paper had been wrapped, and kept in its place by a string.

Merced Monte quickly unfolded it, threw the stone away, and in the light of blazing Dirkton read the following:

"You have come to Dirkton too late, Merced Monte. The days of the Desperate Dozen have been numbered and the hand destined to strike them down hovers over their heads. If you have not lost your old time nerve, go back and die with them."

"I'll go back but we'll debate ther dyin' question some other time!" exclaimed Merced as he turned toward the direction from which the message had come. "You dare not show yer face to ther man from Satan's Own! Come inter ther blaze ov this camp an' cross arms with Merced. No! Coward! You don't hold yer hand over ther Desperate Dozen. We'll never get ter fight you."

There was no answer, and when Merced Monte rode beyond the blaze of the burning camp, to all appearances he was not followed.

CHAPTER IX. KEEPING HIS WORD.

THE morning that broke over Satan's Own found Velvet Van sleeping soundly in Dolores Dick's cabin. The vow and threat of future vengeance which had dropped angrily from Montana's lips did not disturb his repose.

Dolores looked at him in amazement. The big sport, used to rough times and cool men, could not see how the one before him could sleep under the present circumstances.

More than once between dawn and sunrise Dolores went to the door and looked cautiously out. He fully expected to see Montana and the Desperate Dozen descending upon the cabin to force Velvet Van to leave the camp, or to die in his tracks.

When the man from Nowhar got up he laughed, and joined the anxious Dolores at the door.

"I guess I'll inspect ther camp by daylight," he said, in a very commonplace way.

"What! walk through Satan's Own?" ejaculated Dolores.

"Why not? I want ter get acquainted with the place," was the reply.

"You may, but hang me if I would under ther sarcumstances. If you attempt ter perambulate this camp alone thar'll be fun afore you git back er I'm no judge ov Satan's Own grit. Thar's ther door, an' out yonder's ther street."

Dolores stepped back and saw Velvet Van step outside.

"Shoot me fer a gopher half grown! ef I don't b'lieve he wants ter die," murmured the sport left behind. "They'll git between him an' this shanty. Montana will serve ther noice. Wal, good-by, Velvet. It's yer own seekin'—I've done my part."

With amazing coolness the sport from Nowhar sauntered quietly down the main thoroughfare of Satan's Own. He appeared to be out for an airing, and he looked the very picture of fearlessness as he passed between the cabins eyed by more than one man from the little windows near the doors.

"Heavens! what a target!" exclaimed Montana, stepping back toward two revolvers that lay on a table behind him. "I kin serve ther notice myself in ther click ov my dropper. That man must not be permitted ter stay hyer till Merced gets back. Ther girl is comin' with him, an' Velvet Van must not get sight of Nora."

Montana's fingers tightened on the revolvers, and with one in each hand he started toward the door.

The man from Nowhar had stopped in the street directly before the cabin, and attracted by the sight Montana stopped at the window.

"He appears ter hev his eye on suthin' up ther mountain," said Montana, to himself. "Mebbe thar's a signal up thar for him. I'll try an' get at it."

Montana stepped back and swung himself up into the little attic of his mountain cabin. There he loosened several clapboards that formed the roof and spreading them apart, began to inspect the sides of the mountain that overlooked the wild capital of the Cœur d'Alene country.

"If thar's any signal up thar for him, I'll see it," grated Montana. "No man is goin' ter set up a cold deck on Satan's Own an' profit by it while I'm on hand. He sees suthin' above ther camp. Whar is it, old fox?"

Montana strained his eyes for some time before he saw a small moving object among the trees. An exclamation greeted the discovery.

"I knew he saw suthin'! He couldn't fool me!" he cried.

The longer he looked at it, the more he became confirmed that it was a living person. It looked

no bigger than his hand, but then it was well outlined against a bare rock, and the movements told Montana that a message of some kind was being signaled to the man in camp.

For several minutes the man in the attic of the cabin watched this strange sight with much curiosity. Nothing of the kind had ever happened to Satan's Own before and he mentally resolved that it should not be repeated.

"Thar it ends!" he suddenly said. "Now whar is ther galoot from Nowhar?"

He replaced the clapboards hastily and dropped to the floor again. Once more he gripped the pistols and started toward the door.

"Jehosaphat! a knock!" he cried, before he reached it, and then he added:

"Come in!"

Immediately the door was opened, and in obedience to the invitation Velvet Van stepped inside.

The eyes of the two men met.

"I thought I'd drop in ef ye war up," said the man from Nowhar, coolly. "As I may stay hyer awhile, I'd like ter meet all ther citizens ov the camp. Nice place this, for a mountain city. Not six months old, they tell me."

What could Montana say? Was this the man he and his pards had faced the night before? Was this Velvet Van, who had been told that he had to leave Satan's Own within twenty-four hours or die? It did not seem possible.

Montana saw that some sociability was wanted, and so beating down his desire to thrust his revolver into Velvet Van's face, he growled out an invitation for him to take one of the three-legged stools the shanty contained.

"Thanks, I b'lieve I will," was the answer, and the cool-head seated himself. "I am sure I'd like this camp, but thar's that mandate ov yours, that queer document," and he laughed.

"Yes; we put it out ter protect Satan's Own," said Montana. "We built this camp for ther men who first came hyer. You call it a queer dockerman; well, mebbe it is ter some people; but it's peculiarly our own."

"That's a fact. Merced drew it up, I suspect."

"Merced did."

"An' you all subscribed to it?"

"Ther hull camp sanctioned it," said Montana.

"Have you got it on paper?"

Montana looked into the visitor's eyes and started from astonishment.

Here was coolness without a parallel.

"I've got it by heart," said Montana.

"But I'd like ter see it in black an' white—only an idle curiosity, you know, but a very strong one."

Montana made no reply, but went to one corner of the cabin, where from a rough drawer in one of the logs he fished out a piece of yellowish paper, which he unfolded as he came back to the waiting visitor.

"Hyer's ther original dockerman," he said. "It's not as fine as some papers I've heard ov, but, by Jerusalem! it's solid."

Velvet Van took the dirty paper and looked at the mandate, and soon became oblivious of his surroundings in the perusal of it.

How Montana watched him during the inspection! His eyes glared out through his long black lashes, like the eyes of a tiger looking between his bars.

A very narrow table separated them. Montana had slyly put his pistols away, but the tips of his fingers rested upon them.

Velvet Van apparently read every word of the mandate. His eyes seemed to light up with satisfaction.

"Merced wrote this out, you say?" he said, looking across the table.

"Yes. That's in his own hand."

"I thought so," was the response, and Montana saw the document glide across the table toward him. "The man who wrote it ought to enforce it."

"Which means that ye'r goin' ter stay till he comes back?"

"Perhaps."

"What of Satan's Own should say 'No?'" he exclaimed, glaring down at the man who had not stirred from the stool. "We don't hev ter wait for Merced Monte. You saw us last night; you know that we ar' able ter carry out every letter ov ther decree. I'm sorry, Velvet, but we can't harbor yer. It's ag'in' ther rules an' regulations ov this flower-bed. My advice is, 'Pack yer valise an' go.'"

A quiet smile appeared at the corners of Velvet Van's mouth.

"I'm no outlaw that I must be harbored," he said. "Look at me, Montana; I say that the man who wrote that mandate must carry it out on me, if it is carried out at all. He will come back, you say? Well, I'll meet him hyer!"

"You might hev ter fight afore he comes."

"With you?"

"With ther hull camp."

"All right; fight it shall be, then."

Montana looked at the speaker a moment in silence.

"Thar's a man in camp what knows yer," he said. "He knows all yer names."

"Then he knows a good deal," laughed Velvet Van.

"He knows ther woman, too."

"What woman?"

"Ther one that came hyer an' forced Merced inter matrimony. By Heavens! I know her, too!"

"You ought to, I should think."

"Yes. You left Santa Fe once when Crimson Crissie gave the order."

An oath shot from between Montana's teeth.

"You ar' in with her," he said. "I can't be fooled when it comes ter matters like this. You an' Merced's wife ar' at ther bottom ov a game which you'll never win. By Jehu! I'll accommodate you. I'll let you stay hyer unmolested till Merced comes back; then I'd not give a copper for your chances."

The only reply was a fearless look.

Velvet Van got up and walked to the open door.

"I'm much obliged to you for showing me that," he said, his eyes wandering to the decree lying on the table. "No strangers allowed in Satan's Own, eh? I don't blame you pards for drawin' it up. When do you think he will be hyer?"

"Inside o' forty-eight hours."

"All right."

That was all, and Velvet Van walked away.

"Satan an' furies! coolness afoot!" cried Montana. "He'd disarm his bitterest enemy. That's an eye in his head that never struck this camp before. Merced must not come ter Satan's Own with ther girl. He must be warned—prepared for ther devil waitin' for 'im hyer. I can't go; I must watch the demon in velvet. Whar is Owlet? He shall go. Merced Monte must be met outside o' camp. Nugget Nora, as he calls her, must not be seen by ther man from Nowhar."

Five minutes later when Montana entered a certain cabin and faced the little man called Owlet, Velvet Van was not to be seen.

"Owlet, you must go South an' meet Merced. He will not be alone. You will tell him not to bring her ter camp. Yer know why. I need not tell yer. Things ar' dashin' toward a crisis hyer."

Owlet was on his feet in an instant.

"Why don't you settle it?" he exclaimed looking up into Montana's eyes. "He's only one man."

"I know it, but—"

"Find him an' drop him!—that's ther way ter do it! Then Merced could come with her."

"No," said Montana, biting his lip. "You must meet him. Go at once; leave camp quietly."

"If you insist, I go."

"I insist."

Owlet buckled on two revolvers under his jacket, and began to make preparations for departure. Montana went away.

"Sarvin' ye yet," laughed the little man. "Thar 'll come a time, Montana, when J'll not be at yer beck an' call, an' ef ther Man from Nowhar gets in his work that time's not very far away. Yes, I'll meet Merced. I want ter see ther person he's bringin' ter camp."

Owlet led a horse quietly from the desperado camp, and was about to vault into the saddle in the shade of a large rock, when a hand fell suddenly but with softness upon his arm.

"You go ter Merced—I know," said a voice as Owlet looked down into Velvet Van's face. "If you deliver the message received from Montana I'll send you brainless to yer grave! Deliver ther message an' you disobey me; refuse, an' you cross Montana."

"I'm in a fix, ain't I?" said Owlet.

"Yes, but go an' meet Merced if you want ter; but mind you! deliver Montana's message an' die!"

Velvet Van stepped back and looked at the man in the saddle.

"D'yer want ter know my opinion ov yer?" suddenly asked Owlet.

"Yes, if you want ter give it."

"Wal, yer ther coolest tiger that ever hit this paradise. You've got all ther camp ag'in' yer—that is, all ther fightin' crowd. Merced will shoot yer on sight. I know what I'm talkin' about. Hevn't I served that buckskin sport for many years? Let me repeat my words: 'He'll shoot yer on sight."

"Which is more than I'll do to him," was the answer that made Owlet open his eyes.

CHAPTER X.

MERCED SHOOTS ON SIGHT.

"I'm in a fix, ain't I?" muttered Owlet as he rode away. "I stand between two cool heads, Velvet Van and Montana. One says I shall tell Merced so an' so, ther other says if I do he'll paint ther earth with ther contents ov my head. Which man had I best obey?"

Owlet had left the camp by this time, and was riding slowly toward the mountain-trail that led in a southerly direction. The parting commands of two men rung in his ears. Which one should he obey?

Merced Monte, he knew, must be on the road back from the south. Montana had said that the sport would not be alone; he would be accompanied by a girl who must not, for the present, enter Satan's Own.

Merced must come back alone.

"I'll see how he's fixed when I meet him," said Owlet. "Mebbe he'll not hev ther girl with him. If she is missin' the'll relieve me."

Owlet touched his horse with the spurs and went flying down the road.

Many miles from Satan's Own he drew rein in front of a handsome man riding toward the camp, and heard his name pronounced in tones of surprise.

The man was Merced Monte, and he was alone.

A gleam of satisfaction lit up Owlet's eyes.

"How's ther camp?" asked Merced anxiously.

"Flourishin'," was the answer.

"No visitors, eh?"

Owlet hesitated, but then he said:

"None ter mention, I think. Ye'r comin' back alone, Merced, jes' as yer went away—"

"Yes; I didn't succeed," said Merced Monte biting his lip under his mustache. "I got that too late."

Owlet made no reply, but fell alongside the mountain sport, and watched him cautiously from beneath his dark over-arching brows.

"Thar's goin' ter be suthin' done when you reach camp," he said to himself. "Don't I know that you'll shoot ther man from Nowhar on sight? It's no use for me ter post yer about him, Merced; you'll find him soon enough."

But few words passed between the two men during the journey back to Satan's Own. Merced's bootless trip to Dirkton made him more and silent, and, covered by the threat of Velvet Van, Owlet did not feel like saying anything.

"Thar's ther old town," said the messenger at last as the two men struck camp. "You'll excuse me now, Merced," and away went Owlet glad to seek the privacy of his own cabin once more.

"What does that mean?" exclaimed Merced. "He came out ter meet me—ter guard me back ter camp, but never tells me why an' hardly opens his head. Suthin' uncommon has happened. Satan's Own has had a visitor since I left. If he is still hyer, woe ter ther galoot!"

He entered his cabin and looked around. Nobody had disturbed anything there.

A minute's inspection was enough for him, and he was about to depart when the shadow of Montana fell across the floor.

"Hello! back, eh?" exclaimed the long-haired sport, the moment his eyes met those of Merced.

"I'm back."

"Without Nora?"

"Yes."

"Owlet posted yer in time, then?"

"He never said a word."

Montana was silent for a second.

"Hades an' its master!" he suddenly exclaimed. "I sent him ter yer with an important message."

"Wal, he's got it yet."

"I'll get even with him for that work," growled Montana. "Mebbe you didn't start with Nora."

"I did not. But ther message ye sent by Owlet—what war it?"

"This," and Montana lowered his voice almost to a whisper as he stepped to Merced's side. "Ther man in velvet is hyer—has been in camp ever since you went away."

Merced Monte gave his pard a look of amazement.

"Ther woman—my wife's pard, eh?"

"Yes."

"Whar is he?"

"At Dolores Dick's, I guess."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"No Chinaman with him?"

"No."

Merced Monte started toward the door.

"I generally shoot on sight!" he grated through clinched teeth.

"Thar is war eternal between me an' that woman's friends. I will kill them all. You say he is at Dolores Dick's?"

"Thar's whar he war an hour ago."

Montana did not attempt to restrain the man who had just come back, but followed him as he went out into the broad light of day with a wild glitter in the depths of his eyes.

"He didn't bring Nora away. I'd like ter know why," murmured Montana, and the next moment he had covered the distance between him and Merced and his hand was on his pard's sleeve.

"You left Nora at Dirkton," he said. "I thought you war goin' ter bring her up hyer?"

"I war, but I don't tote corpses over ther mountains," was the answer.

Montana almost recoiled.

"Dirktown had only one inhabitant when I got ther an' she war dead," snapped Merced. "I burned ther camp an' ther corpse. Let me find Velvet Van. He's ther man I want ter meet just now."

Merced Monte shook off Montana's hand as he finished and started on again.

"Nora dead? I don't believe it!" exclaimed Montana. "Thar's some secret about this—somebody is playin' a terrible deep game. I'll get ter ther bottom ov it ef it takes a year. Go an' meet Velvet Van, Merced. You'll find yer match in that cool-head, mind I tell yer."

Merced Monte kept on with a huge revolver dangling from his hand and his eyes riveted upon Dolores Dick's cabin. Nobody seemed to notice him, but he was watched by several citizens of the gold-camp.

All at once he stopped.

The door of a cabin directly in his front had been thrown open, and a man stepped into the sunlight.

Merced Monte let slip an exclamation the moment he caught sight of the man.

"I shoot on sight!" he said. "I'll not parley with you a moment. Fool you war ter hold Satan's Own till I got back."

Quick as thought almost, Merced's revolver went up, his arm straightened and then came a loud report!

It was the work of a second.

The Man from Nowhar threw up his hands and reeled toward the cabin door, then he fell at the threshold and moved once convulsively!

A dozen men leaped into the street from as many shanties.

"You don't carry out the decree worth a copper," said Merced facing them coolly. "That man that will never become a citizen ov this camp. Whar's his hoss?"

"In the corral," said some one.

"Bring it hyer!"

Merced Monte never left his tracks, but waited till the horse which had carried Velvet Van into camp had been brought up.

"Throw him across the saddle an' let him go ter his yaller pard," commanded Merced. "Hold on! I'll send a message with him. Mebbe it'll find ther persons I intend it for."

The dead-shot of Satan's Own took a bit of paper from his pocket, and wrote on it with a pencil these words:

"To this man's friends:—

"The hand that took this life will shoot you on sight. Keep off! Satan's Own is a deatht-trap to you all. This fool died at the hand of."

"MERCED MONTE."

He pinned this writing to the shoulder of the man who had been thrown across the saddle by several members of the Desperate Dozen, and stepping back, looked coolly at his work.

"It may find her, and she will know that she is included in this threat," he murmured. "Though she is my wife, I'll not hesitate to shoot her on sight. Ther only games that can be played in this kentry ar' desperate ones. Now, let the hoss go."

Several bronze hands struck the horse, which started forward bearing its awful burden, and watched by the crowd with strange emotions.

This was the man who had amused them the night before, the handsome fellow who was known as Velvet Van. He had been shot dead on sight by Merced Monte, and no man in camp dared question the motive.

"By Jupiter! I war right. I told him that Merced would shoot on sight!" exclaimed Owlet, who watched the horse bear the man out of camp. "Thar goes ther man with six names, leavin' ther woman with five ter play ther game out. An' she is Merced's wife!—came hyer alone an' forced him ter take her at ther muzzle ov ther revolver! Aha, Merced Monte! Thar is yet one individual whom yer may not shoot on sight. I didn't think yer drop game'd win with that quick sport, but it did. I b'lieve it has never failed yet."

The horse and his rider vanished as Owlet finished, and the little man with the coal-black eyes withdrew to his cabin.

He did not see Montana and Merced meet in the street within a stone's throw of his shanty.

"Thar's one hand that'll never be played out," said Mercer, with a satisfied smile at the corners of his mouth. "I got the man in velvet, as you hev seen, Montana. Now let ther rest come on."

"Ther rest?"

"Ther yeller pard an'—my wife!" hissed the sport. "With Nora dead, an' Merced Monte the intended victim ov a desperate game, I guess thar'll be excitement enough hyer ef they try ter carry out ther plot."

"But what is the plot?" asked Montana.

"It hezn't developed yet. I nipped a part ov it in ther bud when I touched ther trigger on Velvet Van's face. But it's ag'in' me an' you, Montana—ag'in' ther hull Dozen. I know that. I pinned a paper ter his shoulder, sayin' who dropped him, an' warnin' all his friends to keep out o' Satan's Own. Somebody will find it. Never you mind, Montana; it will fall inter ther right hands. Come down ter Wisdom's; we'll drink over this."

The two big sports walked side by side to Wisdom Bill's liquor trap and touched glasses over the greasy bar.

"Tell me all about findin' Nora," said Montana whose thoughts seemed to be constantly wandering back to the girl for whom Merced Monte had left Satan's Own within the past few hours.

"You must be interested in that girl," said Merced.

"I am."

A moment later the two men sat at one of the several rough tables in the bar-room and Merced Monte gave an account of his visit to Dirkton, the finding of the putrid body in the deserted cabin, and the firing of the place.

Montana listened with curiosity unabated to the close.

"It's a kind o' mystery, eh?" he said at the end.

"Yes. Let me catch one ov Dirkton's citizens!" growled Merced, his eyes flashing anew. "I'll get his story first an' then drop him in his boots."

"Wal, thar's yer man, I guess."

Merced Monte threw a look over his shoulder and then leaped to his feet.

A man, not a citizen of Satan's Own, had just crossed the threshold and was ordering a drink at the bar.

"Jasper Jim ov Dirkton!" fell from Merced's tongue as he strode almost savagely across the floor.

"Hello, captain!" cried Jasper Jim catching sight of him. "What'll ye take?"

"Ther eternal truth!" shot from between Merced Monte's teeth. "I want ther first. What killed ther girl—ther Queen ov Dirkton?"

"Ther black plague. Jehu! don't make me tell it all, captain. I'd like ter forget it. It struck Dirkton in ther night, an' Injun brought it down upon us, an' afore mornin' ten men war dead. I left—"

"You played coward, Jasper Jim! You left ther girl contrary—"

"I left for assistance."

"An' stayed away."

"No. When I got back, I saw that all war still an' so I left for good."

Merced Monte's fingers left the revolver they had clutched.

"Heavens!" he cried. "I've been thar. I've touched the corpse!"

"Then please excuse this piece ov manhood, captain," ejaculated Jasper Jim starting back and leaving his whisky untouched.

Montana's eyes followed him.

"That man is a liar!" the long-haired sport said to himself.

CHAPTER XI.

MONTANA PINS A LIAR DOWN.

FOR the balance of the day Jasper Jim had the camp pretty much to himself. His movements were not questioned, but they were watched by the keen black eyes that burned in Montana's head.

"I'll bet my head that that galoot's story about ther black plague an' its work is a put-up job, a square lie made for a purpose," said the watcher more than once as he kept his eyes on the visitor from Dirkton. "But Merced war thar; he went arter Nora, an' came back without her. He says that he found her corpse lyin' in one o' ther shanties black an' decomposed, which looks like thar ar' suthin' in Jasper Jim's story; but he didn't look right when he war tellin' it—Jasper didn't. I say it's a lie, an' by heavens! I'm goin' ter stick ter it."

The denizens of Satan's Own seemed to forget the decree which admitted no visitors to the camp. Jasper Jim went wherever he pleased, played with the pards at Wisdom Bill's, and got along very well for a new-comer.

Montana was the man most interested in him. Merced Monte had retired to the solitude of his cabin, leaving orders that he was not to be disturbed unless something very startling transpired. He had actually touched the corpse of a person who had died of the terrible black plague, a disease which it was believed came mysteriously to mountain camps, and wiped them out of existence, a deadly horror which knew no antidote, and which could be conveyed by touch!

Merced Monte had not stopped to think, like Montana, that Jasper Jim might have lied. The disclosure that Nugget Nora had died of the plague was enough; he had not looked into Jim's eyes to search for deceit there. Why should he? He had never known the man to lie before.

More than once during the day a strange smile appeared at the corners of Jasper Jim's mouth, hidden by the ends of his long black mustache.

"I thought I'd get 'im when I opened on ther plague bizness," chuckled Jasper Jim. "I saw a chill go over him when I mentioned that ther plague took ther gal off. He takes ther hull thing down an' he's been cooped up in his shanty all day waitin' for ther hands ov death ter lay 'im out. Ho! ho! trust Jasper Jim for a cool game when thar's no blood ter be spilled."

The man who spoke thus had just left Wisdom Bill's and was apparently enjoying a villainous cigar in the cooling shadows that had stolen down from the nearest mountain.

There was an air of satisfaction about the man from Dirkton, and he walked like a person who had achieved a success.

He strolled to the southern edge of the camp and folding his big arms across a very ample chest, leaned against a tree and puffed vigorously on his cigar.

"Things move smoothly so far," he said, speaking aloud to himself. "If I stay hyer I'll hev ther pear ripe enough for pluckin' in a few days. They don't say anything about the mandate that's given Satan's Own a certain notoriety miles away. I guess ther enforcin' ov it b'longs ter Merced, an' I've got him shakin' in his boots. Ther black plague, eh? Ho, ho! it war a daisy scheme. But mebbe I went too far in tellin' him that the girl war dead. Wal, I'll play it

through that way, anyhow. My part o' ther programme calls for no blood; but they mustn't fool with Jasper Jim. He kin show his claws when necessary."

Walking down upon the Dirkton sport was Montana, with his eyes fastened upon him, and full of triumph and eagerness.

Jasper Jim smoked on and did not see him.

"Hello! got down hyer, eh?" suddenly exclaimed the long-haired sport in tones which so startled the man from Dirkton that his cigar lost all its ashes.

"Yes; I left camp for a quiet smoke," he answered, recovering in a moment.

"I've been lookin' for you," said Montana. "I thought I'd find you down hyer probably. Wal, when did all that happen at Dirkton?"

Jasper Jim started again. The question was not expected and the coolness in which it was couched, told him that Montana had sought him for a purpose.

"When did what happen?" he asked, to give himself time to collect his thoughts.

"You know—that game you gave Merced about ther plague. When did it happen? I want ther particulars."

Jasper Jim tried to look defiant and put on the air of a man insulted.

"Mebbe I'm not believed!" he exclaimed.

"Thet's a fact; mebbe ye'r not," was the answer. "Now, sir, I want ther particulars. When did Nora die?—who saw her?—who left the body in ther cabin ter be found by Merced Monte?"

These questions were direct; they gave Jasper Jim no chance to prevaricate.

"She died second, I think," he said.

"Which is a lie!" exclaimed Montana.

Jasper Jim dropped his cigar and started back with one hand gliding toward his belt.

"Yes," said Montana, "we play that game hyer. But you shoot nobody till you've given me ther hull lay-out. Ef yer touch ther dropper in yer belt, Jasper Jim, I'll blow yer head off! You came hyer with a lie, that whitened Merced's cheeks jes' as you intended it should; but I saw falsehood in yer eyes while you war tellin' it. Thar war no black plague at Dirkton. Merced found ther camp deserted an' a corpse in one ov ther shanties; I don't doubt that. But if so many men died, as yer say, why didn't he find more bodies? Ah! yer black plague is all a sham, Jasper Jim. It exists only in yer head."

Less than five feet separated the two men while Montana threw these words into Jasper Jim's teeth. The long-haired sport of Satan's Own held no weapon in his hands, but the deadliest revolver in the Cœur d'Alene country was within easy reach, and the man who stood before him and heard his utterances knew that he was as quick as a cat.

"You don't want ter stuff this chick with any epidemic stories," continued Montana. "I don't run from lies ov that sort. Thar war no black plague at Dirkton, an' ther girl isn't dead."

There was no reply, but Jasper Jim's look said:

"Get it out of me if you can!"

Montana looked him coolly in the eye while he waited a moment for an answer, then he leaned suddenly forward and clutched the wrist of the Dirkton sport.

"She isn't dead; you know it," he said, in an audible whisper. "Ther corpse Merced found in ther shanty warn't hers. Say it war, an' I'll go back ter camp with yer brains on my sleeve. This is Satan's Own, Jasper Jim. I am Montana! Now go on, and give me ther solid truth. Don't go back ter ther 'black plague' racket ag'in. It'll cost yer a head."

Thus confronted and held, the sport from the South saw that he was in a dangerous position.

He had blanched the cheeks of one desperado, but those of another had not lost a particle of color.

"Do yer b'lieve stories that you force from a feller?" he asked, smiling in Montana's face.

"I'll believe yours, for I propose ter prove it," was the quick retort. "Now, go on!"

"Wal, then, thar war no plague."

"Just as I thought," said Montana.

"I had ter tell Merced suthin'."

"Ov course; an' ther story ye did tell saved yer life. It frightened him out ov his intention ov blowin' yer brains out."

"Jupiter! not so bad as that, I hope."

"It war. As thar war no plague, the corpse Merced found in ther shanty warn't Nora's."

Jasper Jim hesitated.

"Go on. It warn't Nora's body, I say."

"Wal, no."

"Whose war it?"

"A young Injun girl's."

"Thar's a game in all this," said Montana, under his breath, "an' ther g'loot standin' before me is at ther bottom ov it. Let him refuse me ther smallest particular an' I'll take his life. An Injun corpse, eh?" he said, aloud. "What became ov Nora?"

"She went a way."

"Thar's no doubt ov that. She warn't there when Merced struck ther camp. Ther only inhabitant war thar dead girl. Whar is Nora now?"

"I don't know."

"Jasper Jim, you lie!"

"Mebbe she's nearer 'Frisco than hyer."

"No guesses! ther truth is in yer an' I want it, not for Merced, mebbe, but for myself. We'll go ter Nora now."

Jasper Jim looked at the speaker, and would have recoiled but for the bronzed fingers that encircled his wrist.

"I mean it! We go ter ther girl who is not dead." Montana went on. "If you exhibit one sign of treachery I'll drop you in yer boots. This is a cool game, Jasper Jim—a man ag'in man."

"In ther name ov Heaven! what is that girl to you?" cried the Dirkton sport.

"Much!" was the answer.

"Not so much as she is ter Merced though."

"More, mebbe; you don't know. Come, we'll find the horses. You shall have a fresher one than that which brought yer hyer. I want you ter show me Nora."

There was no answer, and when Montana walked off he had Jasper Jim at his side.

"I didn't calkerlate on this," muttered Jim, glancing askance at the long-haired sport. "This is what I call a steel-trap that holds no scent. By heavens! I hev tumbled inter pretty brine, hevn't I? Take him ter Nora! Not ef I hev a thousand Montanas ter deal with! Git ther hosses. I'll offer no resistance. Ye'll find Jasper Jim a lamb till ther time comes for him ter be a tiger."

Montana watched his captive with an eye while he hastily saddled two horses, his own and another. It was the work of a minute.

"Now git up thar! we're off," he said to Jasper Jim as he pointed to a saddle. "We'll leave Merced laborin' under ther delusion that he has touched a subject ov ther black plague. Ah, hyer we go!"

Jasper Jim d'd not look like a man under surveillance while he rode southward beside Montana. He was the long-haired sport's equal in physical proportions, and looked able to cope with him in any way.

"You want ter play this new game fair," Montana said calmly to the man at his side.

"I want ter know whar Nora is—that's all."

Jasper Jim nodded and then turned his face full upon the sport.

"I'll tell yer one thing," he said. "The girl is watched by ther best men in the Northwest."

"Which means that ther citizens ov Dirkton ar' playin' ther game that fetched you ter Satan's Own?"

There was no answer other than a look.

"Isn't it a ransom game, Jasper Jim?" suddenly asked Montana.

"Would I hev told him that ther girl died ov ther plague, ef it war?"

"Hardly. Ther woman what came ter camp t'other night an' married Merced—"

"What!" interrupted Jasper Jim. "Merced Monte married?"

"Yes."

"Who's his wife?"

"A woman that rode inter camp an' made him her husband at ther revolver's muzzle. Who is she? Owl says she has five names."

Montana stopped, but Jasper Jim, laboring under great excitement, exclaimed:

"Go on! Great heavens! a woman forces Merced Monte ter marry her! a woman with five names. Did Owl tell yer?"

"Yes."

"An' he knows her?"

"He does."

"Excuse me but I must see Owl. Jerusalem! what will they say when they hear this? I can't show yer Nora now, Montana, I must find Owl."

"You'll see 'im when I lead yer back—not afore!" said Montana, darting forward and clutching Jasper Jim's bridle-rein. "I kin give yer some information as we move along. I know all her names an' I hev cause ter remember one ov them. Did yer ever hear ov Crimson Crisis?"

"No."

"Ov Revolver Rosa?"

"No."

"The Viper Queen?"

Jasper Jim uttered a wild exclamation and recoiled.

"Great God! I've heard ov her!" he cried. "Look here!"

He threw his hands up to his breast and wrenched open the front of his dark-gray shirt.

Montana leaned forward with eagerness in his eyes.

"Don't I know her? ha! ha! ha!" laughed the Dirkton sport.

On his breast, livid and hideous, was the brand of a viper!

"Did she do that?" asked Merced Monte's pard.

"No one else did. Lassoed an' choked out o' my senses, I war at her mercy," grated Jasper Jim. "When I came to I war branded. But heavens! I killed thar woman! Six months later, Jerusalem George an' I caught her in ther mountains, an' tyin' her ter a log pushed her over a precipice inter ther seethin' waters ov ther Colorado."

"I can't help what you did," said Montana coolly. "I know that she is now Merced Monte's wife. I saw her marry him."

Jasper Jim seemed thunderstruck.

"She's more lives nor a cat," he said. "What kind ov a game is she playin' now?"

"I don't know. She b'longs ter a league ag'in' ther Desperate Dozen."

"Come on. You shall see Nora now," cried Jim. "Ther Viper Queen alive? I'll hev ter look out myself."

CHAPTER XII.

A TIGRESS IN CAMP.

MERCED MONTE was not seen on the streets of Satan's Own until the night that followed his encounter with Jasper Jim at Wisdom Bill's trap.

When he came forth he had the look of a desperate man who had been thoroughly frightened. The story told by Jim had driven every vestige of color from his face at the time, and the man who would not hesitate to wade into twenty enemies shuddered at thought of the black plague.

During the day which had just passed he had learned that Jasper Jim's story had not spread, and he swore Wisdom Bill to eternal secrecy concerning it in his own cabin.

"Mebbe it war only a hoax," suggested Bill.

"I wish I could hope so, Wisdom," was the answer. "But didn't I see ther girl's corpse myself?—didn't I touch it?"

"But yer don't feel ther plague in yer yet, Merced?"

"I don't know how I feel. It's got a hold on me, an' is liable ter get in its horrid work at any time; but I wish somebody'd come ter camp afore it does. I wish she'd show up."

"Yer—yer—"

"Yes, my wife," snapped Merced. "Whar's ther galoot that tied me ter her? They say I didn't finish the parson when I hed him by ther throat."

"He got off arter bein' badly choked."

"An' still remains in camp?"

"No; he left ther night."

"Thet war a stroke ov policy on his part," ejaculated Merced. "He knowed that when I got back I'd finish ther job. I'm goin' out ter-night. Mebbe I kin shake this incubus off by minglin' with ther boys. They don't know anything ov it, Wisdom?"

"Not a whimper."

Merced Monte waited until the day had completely departed before he ventured out into the street.

He went straight to Montana's cabin and entered, as was his wont, without a knock.

The place was empty, and showed no signs of having been visited for several hours.

What had become of the long-haired sport?

"I'll look in at Wisdom's," he said, as he withdrew, and the next minute he entered Satan's Own most noted resort.

Wisdom Bill looked up from his duties long enough to give him a penetrating look.

"Thet galoot's haunted ez sure ez shootin'," said the whisky-dealer. "He'll scare himself inter real black plague inside o' thirty-six hours, if nothing occurs ter prove Jasper Jim a liar. Merced Monte will die like a woman, frightened ter death by a shadde!"

The desperado of Satan's Own came toward the bar with his eyes riveted on Wisdom Bill, and called in a husky voice for a drink.

A decoction of the hottest stuff in the trap was placed at his elbow, and a gleam came into his eyes after drinking it.

"See hyer," whispered Bill, "ef yer don't smile once in a while, ye'll be dead afore mornin'!"

"Heavens, no!" was the answer.

"By Jupiter! it's a fact. Ye've no more got it than I hev."

"Don't yer know that I touched ther corpse?"

"What ef ye hed carried it all around ther camp? Thet galoot lied!"

"I wish he had!"

"I know it. Come, Merced. Let's try ther bar'l trick. Ther boys'll do anything fer amusement."

"No, not to-night," said Merced Monte, as he turned away with the eyes of the bartender upon him.

"All right," muttered Wisdom Bill. "Ye're goin' ter die like a coward at last!" and his eyes followed Merced Monte till he had left the trap.

Waiting quietly for him in the cabin he had lately left, stood a beautiful woman, with clear black eyes and a splendid figure.

She had glided into the mountain camp without having been noticed by any one so far as she saw, and she now stood in the glare of Merced's tin lamp, waiting for the man who, desperado though he was, was ready to start at a shadow.

Her situation did not alarm her in the least; and if she was armed there was nothing to show for it.

She waited for Merced as the tigress waits for the game that approaches her ambush. There was a faint smile at the corners of her mouth, and a strange twinkle in her eyes.

"He will come when he gets ready. I am in no hurry," she said while she watched the door. "Take your time, Merced Monte. It is a long while till eternity."

She had waited more than an hour ere a footstep announced the approach of some one.

"At last! Now I will see the man-tiger of Satan's Own," she murmured.

The next moment the door of the shanty was pushed open and the giant figure of Merced Monte crossed the threshold.

"Wisdom can't laugh me out ov it," he said before he saw the pair of eyes riveted upon him. "I touched ther body. I've got ther black death in my system."

"You don't look like a sick man," said a voice at the sound of which Merced Monte recoiled a foot.

"God above!" he cried. "What fetched you hyer at this time?"

The woman burst into a laugh.

"I'd like to know if a bride can't see her husband once in a while?" she said.

Merced dropped an oath and then sprung tigerishly forward.

"That's near enough," said the woman covering him with her outstretched hand. "For days you've been burnin' to know why I married you. I'm here to solve the mystery, Merced Monte. Stand where you are and listen."

Instead of advancing the desperado of Satan's Own seemed to draw back again.

He could not take his eyes from the woman before him. He constantly thought that she was his wife.

"In the first place, you have not the black death. I'll undeceive you on that point," she went on. "The man who came here with that story was a first-class liar, and the lie was of his own invention."

"Don't lift my hopes," said Merced, drawing in his first inspiration of hope in many hours.

"What I tell you is the truth," was the answer. "Jasper Jim has unmanned you with the very lie that would do the work. You must have given him an excellent opportunity."

"Hang me ef I didn't!" cried Merced.

"So much for that," said the woman smiling. "I think I've snatched you from the grave, Merced, but no thanks for it. Now, why did I marry you?"

The desperado moved forward again.

"Yes, yes! Tell me that, woman, and then break the accursed bonds. You don't know yer husband."

"Oh, yes. I took the step understandingly. I came to Satan's Own that night to do exactly what was done."

"In ther name ov heaven, why?" cried Merced Monte.

"To save another in the first place, and to keep back for a time a blow that will blight this gold camp."

"What's that?—ter save another?"

"Yes. You had made up your mind to make Nugget Nora the Queen of Dirktonw your wife. Will you do so now?"

"No. Ther girl is dead!"

"Think so ef you will."

"But I know it. Didn't I find her corpse ther only thing human in ther town?"

"You say so."

"But didn't I?"

"No, ef you must know it."

Merced Monte could not speak. He stared at the woman as if his eyes were ready to start from his head.

"Nora not dead?" he exclaimed. "Whose corpse did I touch in ther camp? It war a girl's—"

"Yes, the corpse of an Indian girl, which had been substituted for Nora."

"Ther hounds! they went back on me. Jasper Jim came hyer ter frighten me with his story ov ther black plague. Not Nora's corpse, eh? By heavens! I'll win yet."

"Not while I am your wife!" said the woman firmly. "Merced Monte, I married you to prevent your victory. Attempt to marry Nora and I'll deal with you in a manner that'll make you curse the hour of your birth!"

"In Satan's name, who ar' you?" roared the Coeur d'Alene ruffian. "You came hyer as Canyon Clara. Ar' you ther now?"

"No; I am Merced Monte's wife."

"Thunders! I don't mean that," was the answer.

"You say you want ter prevent Nugget Nora from falling into my clutches. What is ther girl ter you?"

"Wed her and find out!"

"Hang me, ef I don't!" cried Merced Monte. "Now ther I've not got ther black plague an' know that ther corpo I found in Dirktonw warn't Nora's you'll see some tall playin'. Mebbe she's in yer power!"

"She is not. I don't know exactly where she is, but I want Merced Monte to know that his wife stands between him and the mountain altar."

"You an' the man in Velvet an' his Chinese pard, I suppose."

There was no answer, only the eyes of Merced Monte's wife seemed to say "yes."

"If Velvet Van is ter strike ther blow ye speak ov Satan's Own will never reel under it!" laughed Merced, continuing. "He left hyer on his hoss a few hours ago, in no condition ter play his hand out. I shot on sight, jest what Owlet told him I would do. As for ther Chinaman, if he comes back he'll find this place hotter nor Tartarus. So I'm not ter play ther hand

I've been holdin'! You stand between mo an' ther stakes, you say. Do you think I'll hold back my hand because ther parson made you my wife? Fool! By heavens! yer relation ter Merced Monte gives you no mercy!"

"Mercy is something I have never sought. I have but this to say: You shall never marry the Queen of Dirktonw while I am your wife."

"I sha'n't, hey?"

"I have told you!"

"Then, by Jerusalem! I'll marry her as a widower!" exclaimed Merced.

"If you can!"

As the words dropped from her tongue, the desperado's wife came around the little table that had separated them, and moved toward the door. Not for a second did she take her eyes from the man glaring at her with the ferocity of a tiger.

But three feet separated them now. A spring on Merced's part would bring them together; but something held the ruffian back.

The woman reached the door unmolested, and gave Merced Monte a look of mingled warning and triumph.

"You think I won't!" he grated savagely.

"I know you never will!" was the reply.

"I'll do it now!"

He darted forward with fire in his eyes, but the next moment a small white hand clutched his left wrist, and he looked into the muzzle of a revolver which had leaped into the light.

"One step—one attempt to break the tie that binds us, and I'll take that vengeance which justly belongs to me," said the woman coolly. "Go back, Merced Monte. Whatever you do, whatever hand you henceforth play, remember that you are Canyon Clara's husband."

The desperado found himself pushed back by a greater strength than he thought the woman possessed, and when he had recovered, he found the door of his cabin shut, and the strange person gone.

"By heavens! I'm stumped!" was his first ejaculation. "Three revelations inside ov an hour! Jasper Jim's plague tale a lie, Nora not dead, an' that infernal wife ov mine sworn ter stand between me an' ther girl. All right! If a thousand wives war standin' in her shoes, I'd go straight ter ther mark jes' ther samel. They don't scare this chick with a woman's threats. By Jupiter! I'll foller her! I feel like a giant, with ther black plague tale proven a lie. I'm a boss catamount yet. I war a fool for lettin' her git away!"

He went to the door and stepped out.

"Jehosaphat! what ar' this?" he cried, as his foot struck a body on the ground.

Stooping quickly, Merced Monte picked up the figure and bearing it back into the shanty laid it on the table under the lamp.

Then he saw that it was a man and the tin lamp revealed the ashen features of Owlet, the citizen of Satan's Own who, according to Montana, knew so much.

CHAPTER XIII.

"I'LL HUNT HER TER TEXAS!"

"I SEE how it happened," said Merced aloud, as he bent over his singular find. "He war listenin' while Canyon Clara war hyer, an' mebbe tried ter stop 'er when she went away. Wal, it war a bad stop for yer, Owlet."

The big sport had made the discovery that the man on the table was not dead, and he set to work to restore him to consciousness, a task which proved successful at the end of half an hour.

A shudder passed over Owlet's frame when he opened his eyes.

"Whar is she?"

"Not hyer, of course," answered Merced.

"You tried ter stop her, eh?"

"No, not that. I merely touched her arm and rattled off all her names, as I know 'em. Jehu! her hand war at my throat by ther time I got through, an' I felt a sharp pain over my heart."

"I saw no wound," said Merced Monte.

"I felt it all ther same. It war like a needle in ther flesh."

"We'll look ag'in."

Merced held the lamp close to Owlet's bosom, while he made the second examination, and this time he discovered a wound so small that it might well have escaped the keenest eyes as no blood had been drawn.

"I thought so!" exclaimed Owlet, when the discovery had been announced. "A woman called ther Viper Queen once carried a dagger like that. Say, Merced?"

"Wal?"

"You'll pardon me, but I heard all ther passed between yer two. She's yer wife."

"Yes," said Merced Monte, from between clinched teeth.

"She gave ther game away, didn't she? She married yer ter keep Nora from becomin' yer wife."

"So she said."

"Why didn't you choke her?" and Owlet's fingers worked convulsively as if he wished them at a human throat at that moment. "You had ther door at yer back."

"I made for her but got pushed back for my trouble an' had ther mortification ter look inter ther muzzle ov a dropper."

The Desperate Dozen.

"Ho!" cried Owlet opening his eyes. "That war a part of ther game I couldn't see. You don't intend to let her play her hand out!"

"Not while I live!" flashed Merced Monte. "I'll begin now. I'll help yer ter yer cabin, Owlet, an' then—"

"Then what?"

"Find that female catamount."

Owlet seemed to brace himself for a trial of some kind, and then slid from the table. He was very strong for a man who had just received a dagger wound, but it was not hard to be seen that he was trying to assume strength which he did not have.

"You find her. I'll get home without help," he said to Merced, as he started toward the door. "But be uncommon careful. You don't know whom you've married. My God! if I had a wife like that, I don't know what I'd do. She knocked Jasper Jim's black plague story into a cocked hat; she told you that Nugget Nora is still alive, an' declared that she doesn't know whar she is. Thar's whar she lied. Foller her an' you'll find ther Queen ov Dirkton; that's my belief, Merced."

The king of Satan's Own saw the door shut behind the strange little man, but could not see him walking unsteadily through the starlight with hands clinched and maledictions falling continually from his lips.

He stepped back, looked once but carefully at his revolvers, and left the shanty.

Satan's Own was not a mountain metropolis, therefore a few strides carried Merced Monte to the suburbs of the camp. A horse followed at his heels.

Halting at the mouth of a pass whose trail, if followed, would soon lead one deep into the mountains, he struck a match and ran it over the ground shading it with his hand.

"She came on horseback!" he suddenly exclaimed after a short inspection of the dust of the trail. "If I hevn't lost my mountain craft I'll find this tigress before long. Owlet says she'll take me ter Nora. That man knows nearly all things. He fastened himself like a leech ter Satan's Own from ther moment ov its birth, but now he's got a bad wound. Those little knives that draw no blood kill with a terrible certainty. An' that woman knew just whar ter strike."

Having found the trail of a horse, supposed to be the one ridden by Canyon Clara, Merced Monte extinguished the match and plunged into the mountains.

He was in the saddle now, and kept one bronzed hand at the butt of a revolver while he rode on, the mountain walls rising on either side to the hight of many feet.

"By Heaven! I'll hunt her ter Texas," he said more than once, as he thought of the strange woman he was tracking. "Goin' ter keep Nugget Nora from my hands, eh? Goin' ter play Hades!"

He did not ride fast; his horse hardly ever got out of a brisk walk, but his keen eyes saw everything.

Everything but the figure trotting behind him like a dog, making no noise in the dust of the pass, and with a coil of rope dangling from the right hand.

"Me catchee, by-m-by," said the sport's follower. "Him no gettee away from Fin Fin. 'Melican man thinkee he see evelyting, but him no lookee back for the Celestial."

For a mile or more this person, Fin Fin, Velvet Van's cool-headed Chinese pard, followed Merced Monte with the persistence of a tracker who was not to be balked.

More than once he was near enough to have cast the lasso successfully, but he did not launch it forth.

The eyes of the Chinaman had a peculiar glitter, and he constantly watched the man in the saddle.

"Me git 'im now!" he said at last, as a bound carried him almost to the horse's heels. "Him no find Canyon Clara dis time."

He stopped and swung the black noose several times around his head, and then sent it forward.

His aim was unerring; the lasso went straight to its mark like an Indian arrow.

A wild ejaculation announced the success of the cast.

Merced Monte straightened in his stirrups and sent forth an oath, as his hand clutched the noose and attempted to break its hold. This he could not do; it tightened in spite of him, and at the other end was the laughing Chinaman, whose eyes twinkled like twin stars.

"No use; 'Melican sport caughtee!" he cried; and, by a dexterous movement on the lassoer's part, Merced Monte was unhorsed, and found himself in the trail at the mercy of his enemy.

"No shootee, Merced Monte!" said the man, who approached along the rope with his almond-shaped eyes riveted upon the gold-camp sport. "Fin Fin show you somebody, mebbe."

"Who? Canyon Clara?" cried the sport. "Show me thet woman, an' by Heavens! I'll thank yer for noosin' me."

"Woman not come hyer. She turn off away back."

Merced Monte gave vent to an expression of disappointment.

"Have I missed her ter fall inter this yaller

dog's trap?" he cried. "Let him come near enough, an' see if thar won't be a hand at his golden throat! Whom can he show me? Ah! ther man I shot on sight—Velvet Van, ther galoot from Nowhar."

If Merced Monte really expected the Chinaman to come within reach of his hand he was mistaken, for that yellow worthy kept his distance half-way down the rope and watched the sport's every movement.

"Fin Fin hold best kerrs now," suddenly exclaimed the leering Celestial. "Once 'Melican man hold 'em in camp, an' made Chinaman go 'way. Who hold 'em now, Merced?"

Merced Monte made no reply—but watched the wary foe closely to get a chance at him.

"You said you could show me somebody," he said suddenly. "I guess that's one ov yer games, heathen. You've got no pard hyer."

"'Melican man find out. Him see who Fin Fin has near. Come! Merced Monte must do better next time."

The gold sport was now ordered to move on, and obeyed with many a resolve to turn the tables on Fin Fin before the eventful hour was very old. He saw the eyes of the Chinaman still fixed upon him, and the revolver that never quavered in the parchment-colored hand thrust forward.

"I'm burnin' ter know whom I'm ter meet," said Merced. "Who can be this yaller devil's pard since I've killed Velvet Van? I never miss even when I shoot on sight, be it night or noon. I—"

"'Melican man turn to the leftee," said the Celestial breaking in upon the sport's thoughts.

Merced Monte obeyed and when he had advanced five steps he was commanded to halt.

"We get hyer," said Fin Fin coming a step nearer. "Strike a matchee, captain. Somebody come."

The next moment a spark of light flashed before Merced's eyes, and as it grew larger he saw a man leaning forward with the burning match in his hand.

"Heavens!" fell from the gold sport's tongue. "I thought my drop game was a success."

The only answer was a smile, and the man who held the light seemed to increase an inch in stature.

"Merced the 'Melican find Velvet Van, eh?" laughed the Chinaman half-way down the rope, which he suddenly dropped and lighted several matches that he had bunched.

The man who faced the sport from Satan's Own was the cool head in velvet whom he had dropped in front of Dolores Dick's cabin and then sent from camp for dead with a warning pinned to his shoulder!

He was far from being a dead man now, for he stood erect, a splendid specimen of manhood, with his eyes glowing like coals of fire.

"It warn't my fault that ye'r' hyer," said Merced Monte, eying the Man from Nowhar. "I certainly did my best. My revolver must hev failed me; it war the first time. I expect you'll drop me in my boots; I'm at the mercy ov you an' thet Greaser yonder!" and Merced sent a mad glance toward Fin Fin.

"The next time you shoot you want ter examine yer victim," said Velvet Van, coolly. "You ar' ther last man I expected to see hyer ter-night. You know the mountain code, Merced Monte."

"It is blood for blood!" said the desperado.

"An' shot for shot. Hold yer matches a little higher, Fin Fin—thar!"

The right arm of the speaker was suddenly thrust forward; at the end of it was a silver-mounted revolver.

Merced Monte looked over it into the glittering eyes of the man in velvet.

"I guess my time hez come," he muttered. "One ov the coolest heads in ther Cœur d'Alene kentry holds ther drop on Monte from Merced." And then he ground his teeth and gave Velvet Van the defiant look of the fearless desperado.

The seconds slipped away.

"By George! I ought to," said the Man from Nowhar, aloud. "Shot for shot has always been my doctrine."

"Touch ther trigger, then. Show yer nerve, Velvet!" hissed Merced.

"No! I hev no right ter drop yer in yer boots," was the answer. "Take that man away, Fin Fin. Give him lasso an' life, both at the same time."

"No lifee, cap'n," said the Chinaman.

"Take him away."

"Me kill 'im, mebbe," laughed the Celestial.

"If you do, I wouldn't give an ounce ov dust for yer head," said Velvet Van. "But take him away!"

The Chinaman came toward Merced with a malicious grin that boded evil.

"Wheel about, 'Melican," he said. "Forward marchee. No more see gold-camp. He! he! he!"

It was the laugh of a demon!

CHAPTER XIV.

LASSO AND BOWIE.

"If I don't turn the tables on this almond-eyed son ov Satan, may I land in Tartarus without boots!" hissed Merced Monte when he found

himself walking away closely followed by Fin Fin, who carried a cocked revolver in his right hand. "Velvet Van will live ter regret ther day he spared my life. I shall show him no mercy when I get ther upper hand. That isn't my style. I shoot on sight, but ther last time I did so I missed, curse ther luck!"

A glance over his broad shoulder told him that the Chinaman was close at his heels and watching him like a cat.

The lasso still tightly pinioned Merced's arms to his side; his fingers touched one of his pistols, but the accursed cord prevented his using it.

"Never mind! I'll get thar!" he growled. "Loosen that noose jes' ther least, heathen, an' get yer passport ter eternity!"

The Chinaman forced the sport frpm Satan's Own down the trail almost to the scene of his capture before he spoke.

"Halt, 'Melican," he suddenly exclaimed.

Merced Monte instantly obeyed. A quick jerk on the Chinaman's part tightened the lasso still more and drew a new oath from the sport's lips.

"Thet's yer game, is it?" he cried. "I suppose I am ter be shot down in cold blood."

Fin Fin had halted by a small tree which had taken root among the stones at the side of the trail, and in the twinkling of an eye, as it were, the lasso was passed around the trunk, and made fast by a marvel of dexterity, and before the sport could catch the Celestial's intentions.

"What 'Melican say now, eh?" chuckled the heathen stepping back, and looking at the prisoner. "Him tied to tree an' at Fin Fin's mercy! Him no more shootee Cap'n Van on sight."

Merced Monte ground his teeth till they seemed to crack. He could only straighten and fix his tigerish eyes on the Chinaman who stood hardly ten feet away with devilish merriment written all over his countenance.

"All right!" he cried. "Do what ye'r' goin' ter do quick. Ther sooner you shot Merced Monte ther sooner yer game wil be played out. Velvet Van will prove no protection. Blaze away! Ye've got ther dropper in yer hand thar. Why don't yer use it?"

Before he replied the Chinaman glided forward until Merced could have touched him if he had not been caged.

"Merced Monte want ter die real bad!" asked Fin Fin. "Him nc wantee ter go back ter his pards no more! Whar 'Melican girl that he wantee ter die, eh?"

"What do you know about her?" exclaimed Merced.

"Fin Fin no foolee," was the answer. "Him not sleepEE ebery nightee."

"No, you yaller cat! By heavens! if I ever get my claws on you, you'll sleep till Gabriel blows his bugle."

"Mebbe 'Melican Merced sleepEE that way first!" laughed the yellow tormentor. "Say; whar girl?"

"Dead."

"No, no!"

"Very well. Thet's equivalent ter callin' me a liar. Ef she isn't dead, find 'er!"

"'Melican Merced no tell?"

"I don't know."

"He wantee ter find her?"

"Yes."

"No find 'er, eh?"

"No."

It was evident that the Chinaman did not put much credence in Merced's answers. He leaned forward and scrutinized him most eagerly.

"Oh, for ther use ov my hands!" ejaculated the sport. "I'd give a thousand ounces ov dust for a foot ov rope."

"It'll do 'Melican Merced no good ter lie ter Fin Fin," said the heathen.

"I'm aware ov that. I might find ther girl if I hed a little string."

"Whateef!" cried Fin Fin, instantly excited.

"I can find her," said the sport, noticing the change produced by his words.

"When?"

"Inside o' twenty-four hours."

"'Melican Merced swear ter that?"

"A thousand times if necessary. She's not much ter me, Fin Fin. I'm goin' ter leave these diggin's whar a gentleman can't foller an honest business without bein' hunted. I'm goin' ter Frisco. I'm rich enough ter be a gold count thar. What's ther use ov stayin' hyer? Ther girl's nothin' ter Merced Monte. I don't keer who gits her. She's got a thousand peers in Frisco. Yes, I went ter Dirkton ter find her, but it war ter tell her that I had shook her. I found ther old camp deserted an' Nora gone. Ther pards hed taken off; it just suited me. By George! it saved me some words an' a scene i didn't fancy much."

These words had a startling effect on the Chinaman. Merced Monte spoke in an off-hand, careless manner that was calculated to disarm the suspicions of even the shrewd Chinaman.

"Hyer ye've got me at ther end ov a rope an' want to blow my brain-box ter pieces because yer think I want ther girl. By Jove! it's a joke, Fin Fin! Take 'er an' do Merced Monte a favor. She's been on my hands long enough. I'll be counted a masher in Frisco afore I've been ther two weeks, an' Nugget Nora will hev been forgotten long afore that."

He didn't ask to be released; he was talking to the point, and he saw the effect his words were producing.

The Chinaman had brought him to the spot with the intention of shooting him down with no show of mercy. He saw murder in the Celestial's eyes when he turned his back on the Man from Nowhar.

"What if Fin Fin cuts ropee?" suddenly asked the heathen, as he laid the naked blade of a bowie upon the lasso not far from Merced's body. "Will 'Merician Merced find girl for Fin Fin?"

"Hang me! ef I don't, jis' ter get her out o' my way," was the response. "You kin use knife or revolver jes' ez you like. Ef you use ther bowie you'll probably find Nora; if ther revolver you may never see her."

That seemed to decide it with the Chinaman, for the next instant the knife came down upon the lasso and it fell apart.

Merced Monte did not leap like a tiger at the Celestial's throat. He merely pressed the noose apart and chuckled at the tactics that had effected his deliverance.

"'Merician Monte show Fin Fin now," said the Chinaman. "Him loose now. Mebbo he go ter 'Frisco without showin' Chinee whar Nora is."

"I'm goin' ter keep my promise," was the answer. "No man kin put his finger down on a word Merced Monte ever broke. I kin find her within twenty-four hours, didn't I say?"

"Yes, 'Merician."

"Then I will." Merced took a stride toward Fin Fin as he spoke. He could not keep down the tigerish light that blazed up in his eyes.

The Chinaman suddenly saw it, and recoiled. In that second he must have regretted that he had not used revolver instead of knife.

"Keep off, 'Merician!" he exclaimed waving Merced back.

"Not now, yaller fool!"

It was, indeed, too late, for the one stride had been succeeded by a spring, and the next moment the Chinaman found himself in the talons of the desperado from Satan's Own.

"Trust me, trust a snake!" laughed Merced Monte his hand closing about Fin Fin's windpipe. "I'm goin' ter give yer a taste ov yer own lasso. When I'm caught I should be shot, on sight. Oh, yes, I'm goin' ter 'Frisco, but not this eve, Fin Fin; some other eve! Want ter find Nugget Nora, eh? Wal, we'll postpone yer success."

Although the son of the Flowery Kingdom was wary and cat-like, he was not a match for the muscular rough who had him in his clutches.

He was dragged toward that portion of the lasso secured to the tree, and in a half unconscious state felt a hairy noose about his neck.

"This is what I call beatin' Merced Monte with a vengeance!" cried the big rough. "When you find Nora, let me know, almond-eye. You'll hardly go back ter Velvet Van ter-night with yer report."

The rope soon deprived Fin Fin of remaining consciousness, and Merced Monte soon had the lasso over the stoutest limb of the tree.

"I'm merciless!" he exclaimed. "They tread a rattler when they step on me, an' I hate Chinamen as I hate hell's pains! I wish I had the hull lot at ther end ov this lasso. By Jerusalem! wouldn't this sapling bear golden fruit?"

He started back and jerked Fin Fin from the ground. The next second the body was swinging in mid-air, and keeping the rope taut, the desperado secured it to the tree in a manner which prevented the Chinaman's feet from touching the ground.

"One game played out by a bad deal!" he said stepping back, and surveying his work. "I'll spoil a head in addition to stretchin' a neck."

Drawing a revolver, he stepped forward and placed it against the Chinaman's temple. His bronze finger was at the trigger.

"Not it might rouse Velvet Van," he said, suddenly lowering the six shooter. "I want ter see that galoot ag'in ter-night. Ther yaller dog is dead enough. If he hed it ter do over I'll bet my teeth that ther man at ther lasso's end wouldn't be Fin Fin."

With another look at the body swinging slowly in the starlight Merced Monte stepped back and walked away.

He had lost his horse by the strange adventures he had just encountered, but that did not seem to bother him. There was another just as good not far away.

He went down the pass toward the spot where he had met Velvet Van.

"One look's all I want," he said. "By Jericho! it'll not be a poor shot ther next time. I'll send ther Man from Nowhar down death's road arter his yaller pard. I'm ther chick who ar' bound ter git to ther end ov this deep game!"

He made no noise on the trail; he seemed to count the steps as he moved along, his eye on the alert, and in each hand the revolvers Fin Fin's lasso had kept him from using twice that night.

"I must be nigh ther spot," he said, halting at last. "Hyer's ther tree that I saw when Velvet Van struck his match."

He listened, but heard nothing. He glided

toward the trail wall ready to shoot on sight. The flash of a match would have sealed the doom of a human life.

"Thunders! nobody hyer. The g'loot from Nowhar hez given me ther slip," ejaculated Merced, disappointed. "I'll go back an' get another hoss ef I don't find mine 'twixt hyer an' camp. I'm goin' ter keep my word ag'in' that woman. I'll hunt her ter Texas!"

He went back over the trail with his face turned toward Satan's Own, and bitterly cursing the luck that had checked him.

He still clung to the revolvers.

"My God! what's happened hyer?" he suddenly cried, stepping back for a moment. "This looks like ther same tree. It is ther identical one! I left ther almond-eyed son ov heathendom swingin' from that limb not thirty minutes ago. He didn't cut himself down. He war dead as a mummy when I went away. Who helped 'im? Velvet Van? All right! I'll shoot daylight through ther Nowhar hound at ther first chance."

Merced Monte did not tarry a moment longer.

Fin Fin, the hanged Chinaman, had disappeared, and if he had examined the bit of lasso swinging from a limb overhead, he would have discovered that a knife had been at work. But he did not wait to notice this, and he was soon pushing toward Satan's Own, where some of the most exciting scenes of his desperate life were to meet him.

CHAPTER XV.

THE TERRIBLE CHECK.

"WAL, Owlet, I didn't catch the tigress!" exclaimed Merced Monte, as he burst, without ceremony, into a certain cabin and caught sight of a human figure lying on blankets in the sorry light of a tin lamp.

Owlet looked up with a wild glitter in his eyes.

"I can't say that I'm sorry," he said.

"Why not?"

"Because don't I want ter catch 'er myself?"

Merced said nothing, but looked at the man.

"How's yer wound?" he asked, at last.

"Mendin'," was the reply. "You've got ter land yer steel in Owlet's heart ter finish him," was added with a smile. "She didn't do that, Merced."

Monte's eyes seemed to say: "It is a pity she didn't," but his lips said nothing.

"See hyer," Owlet went on, reaching under his head. "While you war gone I got a note. It war poked under my door, but I hardly think it war intended for me. They must hev mistaken ther shanty."

While Owlet spoke he found a piece of paper under the blanket, and extended it toward Merced by whose hand it was eagerly seized.

"I couldn't make it out," continued Owlet. "Whenever I tried ter a mist swam afore my eyes. Thet accursed dagger-wound, yer know. Make it out ef yer kin, Merced; it might be important."

Merced Monte was already on his feet and he had unfolded the message.

His eyes seemed to blaze while he read.

"I guess it warn't intended exactly for you, Owlet," he said, throwing a swift glance at the man on the blankets. "Whoever fetched it ter camp delivered it at ther wrong cabin, that's all."

"But what does it say?" asked Owlet eagerly.

"Not much, an' what thar is ov it, is balderdash."

"A threat, eh?"

"Suthin' ov ther kind, but that scares nobody."

"I'd like ter hear it read, Merced."

"All right; hyer goes," and Merced Monte read as follows:

"TO THE CAP'N OV SATAN'S OWN:—You an' all yer pards want ter look out. Ther boss alligator ov ther mountain ar' loose an' wants flesh. Look out!"

"THE ALLIGATOR."

"Is that what it says?" said Owlet somewhat disappointed.

"Yes."

"Thet'll scare nobody. We kin chaw ther Boss Alligator up, Merced."

"Let him turn himself loose hyer ef he wants fun!" was the reply, and Merced Monte appeared to crush the paper in his hand.

Five minutes later he stood beyond the threshold of Owlet's cabin.

"Thar warn't any use in givin' ther thing away ter him an' I didn't," he said to himself. "I read from ther paper jes' what suited me. By heavens! that mist afore his eyes war a lucky thing for me an' ther hand I'm playin' with. Ther next time that a message is brought ter camp for me, I don't want it poked under his door."

He went to his own cabin and there in the light of his own lamp read this message from the same paper handed to him by Canyon Clara's victim, Owlet:

"MERCED MONTE:—If you want Nora you'll find her with ther Dirkton sports in Gold Canyon. Ther corpos left behind war that of an Injun girl. They're playin' a game ag'in' yer. Don't take any stock in Jasper Jim an' his story. Nora is alive an' well at Gold Canyon."

"PISTOL JOHNNY."

This was the real message of the paper which, by mistake, had been thrust under Owlet's door, and the reader will see at once the object Merced Monte had in keeping it from the man on the blankets.

"Nora at Gold Canyon, eh?" he ejaculated. "When I drop down among ther traitors ther'll be a time. Playin' ag'in' Merced. Joe an' all ov 'em. By Jerusalem! I'll open death's gate in ther face ov more than one!"

He hid the message beneath his jacket and then walked down to Wisdom Bill's where at sight of him a number of men sprung up from card tables and spoke his name.

"In ther first place," he said, "we'll drink. Throw out yer liquid lightnin', Wisdom Bill, an' be quick about it."

Merced Monte watched the Desperate Dozen eagerly as they crowded around the bar and downed their quota of fiery stuff with great gusto.

"They're all mine," he said. "They'd storm Satan in his trenches ef I'd give ther order. They'll make quick work ov ther Dirkton pards at Gold Canyon. Now, pards, come with me," he said aloud to the roughs. "Thar's a boss for each man in ther corral."

"What's up, Merced?"

"Never mind. No questions now. It's a ride an' a fight, mebbe—some trigger work out ov camp."

Merced strode toward the door with the whole set at his heels.

In less than five minutes time the band was mounted, and when the camp was about to be left behind Merced Monte lit a match and holding it up drew the paper from his bosom.

"Dirktown has gone back on me," he said, glancing at the dark-faced fellows who gathered around in expectation of some revelation.

"That's enough, cap'n. We'll wipe Dirktown out," was the response.

"But listen first ter this insultin' message that war left at my door ter-night." And holding the paper before him Merced Monte proceeded to read in a low voice:

"We've gone back on Merced Monte. Dirktown hez moved ter Gold Canyon whar it will be found ready ter give Merced an' his friends bullet fer bullet an' bowie for bowie!"

Oaths of rage greeted the sport's invention.

"Thet settles the Dirktowners' hash!" cried the Dozen. "Waitin' for us at Gold Canyon, eh? We'll make that place a graveyard, Merced. Off we ar! Death ter ther traitors ov Dirktown!"

A triumphant smile flitted across Merced Monte's face. He had the men who surrounded him, and they were in excellent humor to be led against the pards who had suddenly turned their backs upon him.

The match held by Merced while he pretended to read the true contents of the message flickered and went out. He flung it away.

"Now for Gold Canyon!" he exclaimed.

"Not yet!" said a voice, so near that every man turned, as if a ghost had spoken.

"Ther Man from Nowhar!" cried Merced.

"At yer service, gentlemen," was the response, as the Desperate Dozen looked into the face of the man in velvet, as he sat on his horse, so near that the brilliant starlight revealed him perfectly.

"Thet's the chap Merced shot on sight, an' sent out o' camp for dead," said more than one man, as he stared at the handsome figure of the sport. "He'll take his turn at ther trigger now, ef he isn't balked."

"I understand that this expedition is goin' ter Gold Canyon," continued Velvet Van, surveying the astonished crowd before him.

"What ef it ar?" growled Merced Monte, whose hands did not lift the two revolvers they had suddenly touched. "You dare not question our motives nor block our way! By heavens! this is Satan's Own, an' you face ter-night ther Desperate Dozen!"

"I'm aware ov that," said the Man from Nowhar coolly. "This expedition will not move on Gold Canyon to-night!"

"It shall!" roared Merced. "We hev a habit ov goin' when an' whar we please, an' by ther eternall ter-night shall be no exception."

"Thet depends. Gents, you will go back ter camp an' unsaddle yer hosses."

"We go to Gold Canyon er drop dead from our saddles!" flashed Merced Monte.

"Very well. I am hyer ter oblige yer," laughed Velvet Van, and the next moment the band looked into two revolvers, which had leaped suddenly in their faces.

"This game is a cold one, an' shall be played to the last card if necessary!" came over the outstretched weapons. "I know every mother's son ov ye, an' I've marked ag'in' each one a vow ov vengeance. Gentlemen ov Satan's Own, you kin go back, er tumble from yer saddles hyer. Take yer choice. This expedition doesn't move on Gold Canyon to-night!"

The desperadoes glanced at their leader. He sat before the leveled weapons of the Man from Nowhar, with hardly a vestige of color on his face.

"You can't git us all!" he suddenly grated.

"Mebbe not; but I kin play havoc with the

The Desperate Dozen.

mountain bouquet before me. Which shall it be, Captain Merced—Satan's Own or death?"

"Death!"

"Is that yer choice, men?"

There was no answer.

Merced Monte's hand went out until it had covered Velvet Van.

"You can't play yer game out. I swear yer sha'n't!" he exclaimed. "You know that ther touchin' ov a trigger hyer'd seal yer doom in ther droop ov an eyelash. No one man kin fight Satan's Own an' live. We give yer ten seconds ter leave this camp!"

A cool laugh full of defiance was the answer; it made the laugher's black eyes glitter.

He said no more, but the desperadoes in the front rank saw his lips shut firmly behind the last sound.

The next instant a flame leaped into the faces of the gang, and a stalwart rough sprung up from his saddle and pitched backward against Merced Monte, while a death-cry pealed from his throat.

"Keep yer droppers down, or I'll empty every saddle before me!" continued the sport, in a stern voice. "I'll make you pardless in less than a minute, Merced Monte. You know I don't want your blood. I don't shoot Canyon Clara's husband! Now, gents, go back ter camp, er foller ther pard who will never see Gold Canyon!"

The death-shot had sent every ruffian back; they looked at Merced Monte for a command, and the one he gave he seemed to wrench from his heart.

"Back ter camp!" he said.

CHAPTER XVI.

QUICK VENGEANCE.

THERE was a good deal of deep cursing, but they went back.

The grated order, forced by the terrible exigencies over Merced Monte's lips, did not have to be repeated; the Desperate Dozen were ready to retreat from the leveled pistols and the cool eyes of the man-tiger from Nowhar.

They took back with them the man who had dropped dead at the one shot, and laid him out on the floor of Wisdom Bill's den—where, as may be imagined, they registered a solemn oath to "git even" with the man who had wiped him out.

"Thet demon turns up when he isn't looked for," said Merced Monte. "He warn't where I left him, when I went back arter pullin' ther Chinaman up in ther pass, an' I didn't expect him ter prohibit ther expedition ter Gold Canyon. I'll know who he is afore I go an inch further in this game. Thar's nothin' Owlet doesn't know."

He left the whisky shanty and two minutes later burst into Owlet's cabin without ceremony.

"Hyer!" he said, shaking up the man who appeared to be asleep. "Tell me who that man is!"

"What man?" cried Owlet.

"Ther devil who knocked Pecos Phil dead from his saddle."

"Who did that?"

"Ther galoot from Nowhar."

"Not ther man you shot dead on sight?"

"Yes," answered Merced Monte, chagrined. "You know blamed nigh everything, Owlet. Why does he hate the Dozen? Tell me."

Merced Monte dropped upon a three-legged stool beside the wounded man's blanket, and waited uneasily for him to impart the desired information.

"It's true that I know a good many things," said Owlet. "I could tell yer more about yer wife—"

"Hang ther tigress!" interrupted Merced. "I'm on ther other trail now. I want ter know about Velvet Van. How many names has he?"

Owlet reflected a moment then with a twinkle in his eyes said:

"Six, perhaps."

"A man ov many names!" ejaculated Merced.

"Have I ever met him before?"

"Think," said Owlet looking up into the gold sport's face. "Go back over yer life fer five minutes. Ye'r in no hurry, Cap'n Monte."

Merced put his head between his hands, and with his elbows resting on his knees, plunged into deep reflection, watched with a weasel's eye by the man reclining on the blankets.

"He'll git ther ef he thinks long enough," murmured Owlet. "If he goes back over his life with care, he won't have ter ask me ther second time who Velvet Van is. Ah! he's gettin' thar now!"

All at once Merced Monte raised his head and then sprung erect.

"I've thought ov 'em all—I've gone over ther hull ground, an' I kin fasten on but one man, but—"

Owlet chuckled audibly.

"You war goin' ter say that yer hanged him seven years ago," he said.

"That's it exactly, Owlet," cried Merced. "Can this man in velvet be Rosebud Rhoderick, the sport we pulled up at ther end ov a lasso, an' left hangin' for ther buzzards seven years ago?"

"He's no one else," said Owlet. "I located him ther moment he hit ther cam."

"The deuce yer did! An' kept it?"

"I warn't asked ter tell," said Owlet half sullenly. "But you've located 'im now, Merced."

"Rosebud Rhoderick, may Heaven spare you for my trigger!" cried the captain of the Dozen. "How many lives hev you? Hanged an' shot, you still play a bold hand an' forced ther pards ov Satan's Own back from one expedition on which much depends. But, Owlet, you remember that five days arter we left him hangin' in ther gulch we saw a decayin' corpse at ther end ov that same lasso."

"Yes."

"How d'yer account for that?"

"The man who rescued Rosebud Rhoderick found a victim ter supply his place."

"But who saved him?"

"His Chinese pard."

"By heavens! he paid that debt ter-night when he cut the almond-eyed Satan down!" exclaimed Merced. "Too late, though, he did it, for when he got that the golden gates had swung open for ther Celestial."

Owlet made no reply.

"Wal, I know who I'm fightin' now," Merced went on. "So Velvet Van an' Rosebud Rhoderick are one. Why didn't I think ov it afore?"

"You never ask me about Canyon Clara any more!" said Owlet, fixing his deep black eyes strangely upon Merced Monte.

"Ter perdition with her!" was the response.

"You never think that a close tie might unite her to Velvet Van."

"What's that?" cried the desperado, stooping suddenly over the man on the blanket. "Is she his wife?"

"No."

"What, then?"

"His sister."

Merced Monte laughed incredulously.

"See hyer, Owlet; as a courier ov surprises you take ther bun. Velvet Van an' Canyon Clara brother an' sister. I don't b'lieve it."

"I thought you would not," was the answer. "If ye'r not partic'lar you needn't b'lieve that he's ther man we hanged in ther gulch seven years ago."

"Mebbe I'll reject that, too."

Owlet shut his lips resolutely as if he had said all he intended to say on that subject, and when Merced addressed him again he stubbornly turned over and kept silent.

"He's playin' oyster now," growled Merced, under his breath. "Thet's a habit ov his when we smooth ther ha'r ther wrong way! Hang me! ef I'll humor yer by turnin' it back."

Merced Monte passed to the door, and from it looked back at the man who still maintained his stubborn silence, but who was watching him out of the corners of his sloc-black eyes.

"Rosebud Rhoderick, eh? Wal, I'll trump ther kerd he played ter-night, er land in Tartarus without boots."

Then he passed out, shutting the cabin door half madly behind him, and tramped away like a lion in a rage.

No sooner had he departed, than Owlet sprung up from his cot and made his way across the room.

"He couldn't see Rosebud Rhoderick in Velvet Van, but I could," said the little mystery of Satan's Own. "But then, when a man pulls up another an' leaves him danglin' in the air, it's natural for him ter expect him ter stay hanged. I'll bet my brains that thar'll be a cyclone in camp inside ov forty-eight hours. The man who dropped Pecos Phil, an' then forced ther hull gang back, isn't goin' ter stop thar—especially when he owes 'em ther grudge Rosebud Rhoderick does."

Owlet did not look much like a man seriously wounded.

He had eyes in his head that scintillated like a serpent's, and possessed the activity of a cat.

"They'll organize ag'in' the storm," he said, opening the door. "Merced will tell ther Dozen who ther Man from Nowhar is, an' thar'll be a time. It'll take place at Wisdom's, whar I expect they've taken Pecos Phil. What if Velvet Van should come back in ther midst ov ther riot? Heavens! I wouldn't miss ther encounter for ther earth."

Owlet had concluded to inspect affairs at the liquor den, and left his cabin immediately.

He found that he could move along without much pain, although every step told him that the dagger-wound was still an unpleasant companion.

"Gods! something's behind me," suddenly flashed across his mind. "They don't fool Owlet's ears arter dark. I've heard many a snake crawl over a bed ov sand."

He did not stop, but moved on, listening over his shoulders, with a knife lying ready for an emergency along his right sleeve.

"Man, beast or devil, I'm ready for ye!" he muttered. "Yell find Owlet as quick as a cat, an' as deadly as a rattler!"

He was not half-way between his cabin and Wisdom Bill's when he heard for the third time the sound that had startled him.

It was not behind him now, rather ahead, and Owlet quickened his steps without noise and with every sense on the alert.

He soon reached the vicinity of the trap, and then saw a figure glide toward the light that came from the open door.

It was no citizen of Satan's Own—Owlet would have staked his reputation on that.

He kept in the shadows of the cabin and saw only the figure which would soon stand in the light if it did not halt very shortly.

"A spy," ejaculated Owlet. "A part ov ther hand Velvet Van is playin' ag'in' more'n half this camp."

The next moment the person watched stepped into the light and became a human statue there.

Owlet leaned forward in his eagerness and with dilated eyes.

He saw a well-sized man in parti-buckskin and with features not hard to locate.

"A son ov Chinadom!" ejaculated Owlet.

"What did Merced say about hangin' him awhile ago? By Jericho! he's got a dropper in each hand. He's back hyer fer blood!"

At that moment the yellow hands of the Celestial left his sides and straightened in the light.

The polished revolver barrels gleamed like his almond-shaped eyes.

Owlet took two long strides toward Fin Fin; the last one ended as one of the revolvers spoke.

From Wisdom Bill's trap came a cry, a dozen terrible oaths, and a dull heavy thud!

Owlet made a dash for the slayer and before the death-shot could be repeated, he threw himself with all his power upon the Chinaman.

A dozen stalwart men rushed pell-mell from Wisdom Bill's to see two figures struggling in the light of lamp and star. They rushed forward and instantly closed them in.

Half a dozen hands darted at the combatants, and in less than a minute Owlet and the yellow avenger were torn apart.

A wild shout of rage greeted Fin Fin's recognition by the desperate crowd, and he was dragged across the space between his halting-spot and the door, and thrust into the saloon with twenty cocked revolvers at his head.

On the floor lay a man in heavy boots and dark shirt. They forced the Chinaman alongside of him, and saw his eyes flash the moment they met the Celestial's gaze.

"Help me up," said the desperado on the floor to the pards of Satan's Own.

He was obeyed.

"Now, give me a dropper."

Six cocked revolvers were thrust forward, but his hand closed on the one proffered by Crystal Jack.

"Now!" he cried, "stand ther yaller viper up before me!"

Fin Fin was carried forward to within three feet of the shot ruffian and held ther by two men.

"What hangin' won't do, my revolver will!" cried the stalwart tough. "You came ter camp fer Merced Monte's blood, eh? Wal, thar ye've got. Now I'll take yer brains in return!"

The crowd involuntarily drew back. Not a muscle of Fin Fin's face moved.

"I can't see him!" suddenly cried Merced.

"Thar's—a—black mist—before—my—eyes!"

With the last word he staggered back, but was caught by strong arms before he could touch the floor.

"What shall we do with ther heathen, cap'n?" asked several men.

"Flay him alive!"

A startling shout seemed to shake the roof.

"Shut ther door thar!" cried Crystal Jack.

"We'll carry out Merced's wish ter ther letter!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE HAND MONTANA PLAYED.

"I TOLD yer ye should see ther Queen ov Dirk-town. We ar' almost ter her. Cap'n, ye'll permit me ter blindfold yer, eh?"

Montana turned and looked amazed at Jasper Jim with whom, as the reader will readily recollect, we left him riding from Satan's Own several chapters back.

The two men were many miles from the desperadoes' camp, and in the midst of a wildly picturesque region, where was situated Gold Canyon, the goal of Merced Monte's last hopes.

"Blindfold me? What for?" cried Montana, the long-haired sport.

"Ther new camp must be kept secreted for several reasons," answered Jasper Jim. "You b'long ter Satan's Own, cap'n; you ar' Merced Monte's friend an' pard. Once in camp, ther rag shall be taken from yer eyes."

"All right, then," said Montana, acquiescing.

"Put on ther blind."

Jasper Jim produced a very dirty handkerchief, and leaning from his saddle, blindfolded the man whose revolver had been ready to bore him through at the first sign of treachery.

When he had finished, he grasped the s'cr't's lines and led the horse on.

"I see," said Montana to himself. "He doesn't want me ter find ther trail ter ther camp arter I've been ther. They won't let me take Nora away without a battle, I expect, but ther remains ter be seen. I didn't come down hyer for nothin'. What trickery can't do, mebbe cold lead will."

Montana seemed to be riding through a region of rayless night, for Jasper Jim had placed the handkerchief so well that not a gleam of light penetrated his eyes.

If he could have seen, he would have observed Jasper Jim suddenly lift his hand to three stalwart men who seemed to form an outpost. The movement was a signal for silence, and the three gazed at the Dirk-towner in amazement as he rode up with the blindfolded sport.

A few rods further on a dozen men formed a very romantic group, and Jasper Jim drew rein in their midst.

"Thet isn't Merced?" said a dozen voices.

"Not by a long shot," was Jim's reply as he reached over and jerked the bandage from Montana's eyes.

"Montana!" exclaimed several men the moment the face of the sport was revealed. "See hyer! Jasper, ye bad no orders ter fetch him hyer."

"Blame me with my presence hyer," said the sport of Satan's Own before Jasper Jim could answer for himself. "I said 'Take me ter ther new camp,' an' Jasper knew I meant business. Gentlemen, I'm hyer ter see ther girl—not ther one that war left dead in Dirk-town, but ther live one now among yer. I am not Merced Monte, though men call me his pard."

The Dirk-towners exchanged expressive glances during which time Montana, the long-haired, took occasion to survey his surroundings.

He was in the heart of Gold Canyon, rough, rugged and wild. Walls that seemed to stretch to the sky lifted themselves on either side, and here and there they were seamed as if cataracts had poured down them many years before.

He saw no signs of human habitation, yet he knew that he had reached the abode of the roughs of Dirk-town.

"You've seen her before, hevn't you, Montana?" suddenly inquired a buckskinned giant who stepped to the sport's horse as he spoke.

"Once or twice."

"Then, why come all ther way from Satan's Own ter see her ag'in?"

"Ter satisfy myself that she still lives."

"Ter tell Merced Monte, eh?"

"Who said I'm goin' ter tell him?"

"No one, but that's ther supposition, seein' that ye'r pards."

"Very well," responded Montana, in an off-hand way. "Show her er not—jes' as you desire."

"Bring her out!"

A moment later there appeared walking between two men almost as stalwart as the spokesman, a lovely young girl not more than eighteen with deep blue eyes, a matchless figure and light step.

"Nugget Nora!" parted Montana's lips.

"Thar's ther daisy ov ther Coeur d' Lene kentry," said the giant. "You've come down from Satan's Own ter see her. Now, take'er all in. They don't paint pictures like that, Montana. It isn't in ther wildest brushes. Nora, this is Montana, ther long-haired sport of Satan's Own—Merced Monte's right bower an' confidential agent."

"I object ter ther last name," said Montana quickly. "I'm no man's agent. I work for myself. Merced an' I ar' liable ter dissolve partnership at any moment," and then he fixed his coal-black eyes on the girl who stood a few feet away looking closely at him.

"She's worth playin' a cool hand for. I don't blame Merced," said Montana to himself. "But Canyon Clara stepped in between, an' made him her husband."

Several minutes passed away in this look and counter look.

"Come, cap'n. I guess I've fulfilled my part ov ther programme. Ye've seen Gold Canyon an' ther girl. Ar' ye ready ter go back?"

Montana started visibly at the words which fell from the lips of Jasper Jim whose hand rested on his arm while he talked.

What! go back and leave the girl there?

"Blindfold him, Jasper," said the leader of the gang.

Montana drew back and threw a swift glance at the revolvers in his belt.

"Oh, we've got ther call on yer!" laughed the big man. "It'll be double death for yer ter touch one of yer droppers. This is Camp Terror, Montana, an' we're twenty ter one. You'll take a message back ter Merced for us, eh? We'll not go about ther bush any longer. Ther hand we hold we'll show above-board an' play it out. Thar stands ther only queen Dirk-town ever had. Ther corpse found thar arter we left war a trick ov ours that deceived Merced. You'll go back ter him an' say, 'Ten thousand down for ther girl!'"

"Heavens, no!" cried the young girl starting toward Montana before any one could seize her. "For God's sake let me not be sold like that! Ten thousand for me from a man whom I hate? No, no! He will pay that. He will not hesitate. Have mercy, Shasta Saul. Make it a million—a sum he cannot pay!"

"We don't want ter bankrupt Satan's Own," laughed Shasta Saul, whose hand closed about the girl's arm and prevented her from rushing to Montana for protection. "We know durned well that ye'r worth every dollar ov it, but we want ter play half-fair with Merced. Ten thousand down is ther ransom. You'll tell ther king ov Satan's Own, Montana. No money, no girl!"

The face of the beautiful creature suddenly grew white.

"Will you tell him?" she appealed to the long-haired sport. "I stand before you a waif—a girl without a name but Nugget Nora, which is not my own. Carried from some home when a babe, I believe by the very man who rules in Satan's Own, I have lived among men like these who surround me. In all that time I have seen but one white woman, and she came to me one day in the woods near Dirk-town and looked for a certain mark which I carry on my shoulder. When she found it she laughed, saying it was worth more than all the gold lands to her, and went away. I have never seen her since."

"Thar!" said Shasta Saul sternly, when the girl paused. "Thet's a romantic story, Nora, but Montana needn't take it all down."

"It is true! Let me swear it!" cried the girl. "You will not convey the message to Merced."

"Whether he does or not, we'll git it thar!" laughed Shasta Saul. "Take her back, Rattler."

A short, heavy-set rough approached and clutched the girl's arm.

"Take yer hand off!" exclaimed Montana and Rattler started back from the cocked revolver thrust suddenly into his repulsive face. "If you or any ov yer pards touch one of yer droppers, I'll paint yer shirt fronts with yer brains! Git back! every mother's son ov yer! Montana bec faced bigger odds than this. What's a camp full ter one man when that individual carries death at his fingers' ends?"

Breaking away from Rattler even before he could relinquish his hold, the girl sprung to Montana and placed herself under the protection of the revolver that now seemed to cover the whole speechless crowd.

"Gophers ov Gold Canyon, I give yer three seconds ter move twenty feet back. Jasper Jim guided a reg'lar mountain wildeat ter this gulch. This girl b'longs ter no man, an' I'll take her without payin' a dollar down! Waltz back, my canyon coyotes. Push yer pards away, Shasta Saul, or by ther eternal! thar'll be trigger work in this camp!"

The bronze hand that held the weapon over Nugget Nora's head did so without a quaver.

The girl's appeal had happened at a moment when the whole camp was in front of Montana; he had nobody at his back to deal a stealthy blow.

"Go 'round the horse," he whispered to Nora. "Remember. I act for you, not for Merced Monte."

The girl gave him a quick yet trustful glance, and glided under the horse, reappearing at the further side in a moment.

"You can't take her out ov this camp!" grated Shasta Saul evidently divining Montana's purpose.

"That's what I came ter do," was the answer spoken in the coolest of tones. "I am goin' now. Gophers ov Gold Canyon, thar'll be a red trail fer ther feet that foller Montana ov Satan's Own. Not a dollar down fer property that hez no owner!"

"If you take her off we'll foller you if you lead us ter ther gates ov perdition! Beware, Montana!"

The long-haired sport laughed till the deadly look seemed to leave his eyes.

"Agreed!" he cried. "Foller me an' I'll open ther gates fer more than one ov yer," he said. "Keep alongside ov my hoss, girl. This is my day out."

The next moment the horse he rode was moving slowly away, and the maddened men of Gold Canyon saw him turn half-way around in his saddle and keep two heavy revolvers thrust forward.

A smile of victory played with the corners of his mouth concealed by his long mustache as he coolly rode away.

"I guess they'll curse ther day Jasper Jim brought Montana ter ther new camp!" he said.

"Who said I war goin' back ter Merced with this mountain pink? I don't hev ter! But, if I do go back thar, you kin bet that I'll hold my own."

Twenty men with hands menacingly near as many belted revolvers watched Montana ride from their midst. The sport's horse concealed nearly all of Nora's body, and they did not see the look of gratitude that filled the girl's eyes.

Straight down the canyon rode Montana with Nora walking at his knee.

He was fifty yards away when he saw Shasta Saul whirl upon a man who spellbound had witnessed the results of Montana's coming to the camp.

"You fetched that cool-head down 'upon us, Jasper Jim!" cried the big leader.

"He forced me. He stole a march. By heavens! Shasta, I'll pay him back."

"No! we'll do that. We want no traitors in Gold Canyon!"

With the last word a pistoled hand went up, and with the loud report that followed, Jasper Jim dropped his half-drawn six-shooter and fell dead in his tracks.

The whole camp seemed stunned.

CHAPTER XVIII. THE SILENT SWOOP.

"SHUT ther door, thar! We'll carry out Merced's wish ter ther letter!"

The reader knows what that wish was, that Fin Fin, the Chinaman, should be flayed alive.

The sudden blinding mist which had floated before Merced Monte's eyes just when he was about to send a bullet through the Celestial's head, was thought to be a harbinger of death, and a man shut the door of Wisdom Bill's trap at Crystal Jack's words.

The almond-eyed avenger looked quietly into the face of fate and did not move a muscle.

Merced had been prevented from falling to the floor, and two big men held him against the counter while a glass of burning brandy was forced down his throat. "I don't know whether my time's come or not," said Merced, recovering. "But I want that Chinese dog skinned alive all ther same. He stole inter camp an' shot me because I pulled 'im up awhile ago. I war a fool fer not blowin' his head off when I hed my pistol at his temple. Ther Man from Nowhere cut 'im down an' sent 'im hyer ter do jes' what he did. Whet yer knives, boys, an' flay ther almond-eyed Satan."

No men ever sprung so eagerly to a task before.

Fin Fin was hustled to the center of the room where two whisky barrels were placed, and in a short time stripped to the waist, and lashed to a board laid upon the barrels.

If he had hopes of a rescue, nothing indicated it. He sent no hopeful glances toward the door, but gave his enemies look fer look, and maintained a silence which amounted almost to indifference.

"His pig-tail first!" cried Crystal Jack, and a sweep of the rustler's bowie severed Fin Fin's cue, which was tossed toward Merced Monte with a laugh.

"You'll do it up brown, pards, I know that," said the king of Satan's Own. "But if Chick an' Cham will take me over ter ther shanty, I'll ask yer ter excuse me."

"All right, cap'n! We'll flay this Chinese rabbit in ther highest style ov ther art. Don't let that trouble yer, Merced."

Merced Monte looked at the man strapped to the board, and then permitted the two pards to lead him from the place.

"Yer say yer found Owlet an' ther Chinaman tusslin' arter ther shot?" asked Merced, during the journey back.

"Yes."

"Whar's Owlet?"

"He must hev gone back ter his shanty."

"Why didn't he jump that Celestial before he shot? Did he wait until he hed kivered me?"

"We don't know, cap'n."

Merced Monte was silent for a moment.

"I left him in a stubborn fit," he murmured. "Mebbe he stood by an' let Fin Fin get his work in afore he interfered. Thet little black-eyed Satan has been a shrewd fox ever since I first met him. I don't trust him. He told me ter-night that Velvet Van is Rosebud Rhoderick, whom we hanged seven years ago. I don't know about that."

Several minutes later Merced Monte was led into his cabin, and when he had dropped upon a stool near the table, he looked at his conductors.

"Go back ter ther boys, an' don't bring me a report until ther heathen hez been skinned alive," he exclaimed, and then dismissed the two roughs with a wave of the hand before they could put in a word.

In the light of the tin lamp he then proceeded to examine the wound he had received. Opening his shirt in front, he discovered a good deal of clotted blood, and found that the bullet had passed under his shoulder, fortunately hitting no vital spot and inflicting no very bad wound.

"It would hev been my heart, if ther yaller hound hed aimed lower," muttered Merced. "Ther next time I hang a man, I'll put a bullet through him ter make sure ov ther carkiss. I could throttle Owlet! He could hev saved me this winging, but he would not. If he war near enough ter hev jumped Fin Fin arter ther shot, he war nigh enough before. No; he didn't want ter! Ther stubborn fit war still on."

He washed the wound with whisky and water, all the time grating his teeth and heaping curses upon the heads of two men—Owlet and Fin Fin.

"Ther boys ar' fixin' one; why should I not tend ter ther other?" he suddenly exclaimed. "Ther black-eyed man is grinnin' in his shanty over what he did; I'll broaden ther grin, but not in a way he likes!"

Merced Monte got up and reached the door.

"When I git back hyer thar'll be two dead men in Satan's Own—one without a skin, ther other with no head!" he hissed. "I'm not goin' ter b'lieve that Velvet Van is Rosebud Rhoderick, nor that he an' my wife—curse her game!—ar' sisters. I'll git ter Gold Canyon yet!"

He went down the street of the camp, toward Owlet's shanty, like a man bent on vengeance. Not a sound came from Wisdom Bill's. It was as silent there as if death had smitten the Chinaman and his flayers.

Merced Monte's feet did not pause until he reached Owlet's cabin, and then he listened for several minutes at the door.

"I'll go in an' show him that he jumped ther yaller shooter too late," he exclaimed, and the

The Desperate Dozen.

next minute he threw the door wide and bounded into the shanty.

He landed several feet beyond the threshold, and in the light of a tin lamp that stood on Owlet's rough deal table.

No cry greeted him, and nobody rose to give him a reception of any kind.

Merced Monte paused in the middle of the room, and looked the picture of astonishment.

"What! didn't ther galoot come back?" he cried. "By Heaven's I'll bunt him ter Texas!"

No answer greeted him.

He stared at the vacant bed on the floor, and searched the room thoroughly.

"Ther bird isn't hyer," he was forced to admit. "Mebbe he'll come in presently. I kin wait hyer as well as in my own shanty," and seating himself, Merced Monte faced the door, with a cocked revolver lying on the table before him.

"It'll be dangerous for ther right man ter enter ther door," he laughed. "He's liable ter get his passport ter eternity. I hope Owlet will come in first. Who else so likely to come?"

The minutes slipped away, with Merced Monte waiting like a spider for the owner of the cabin he had invaded.

He could imagine his men slaying the Chinaman strapped to the board across the whisky-barrels; could hear in imagination the poor wretch's groans and the desperadoes' brutal jeers.

It was an eventful night for Satan's Own, one which had no parallel in its past history.

"He's hyer at last!" suddenly cried Merced Monte, catching up the revolver and leveling it across the table at the door. "Little dreams ther 'cyclopedia ov Satan's Own ov ther rock he's about ter strike. Come in, my daisy, an' lose yer fragrant bloom!"

The next moment the door of the cabin slowly opened, and instead of the face and form of Owlet, Merced saw a hand and a cocked revolver!

"Throw down yer dropper an' stand up!" said the voice of the unseen visitor, in tones not to be mistaken. "We want no child's play in Satan's Own to-night, Merced Monte!"

While he saw no face the revolver covered him completely; he was at its mercy.

"Euchered, arter all!" said the sport. "Thet man isn't Owlet. Who is he anyway?"

"Git up!"

Merced let his weapon fall upon the table and got upon his feet.

"Throw ther weapon under ther table!" was the command.

Merced sullenly obeyed.

An instant later, the door was thrown open, and the boss sport of Satan's Own, found himself confronted by a man, at sight of whom he uttered a startling cry.

"Velvet Van! In heaven's name! why ain't yer helpin' yer flayed pard?"

"He needs no help," was the answer

"Yer come too late, then!"

"I never come too late."

Merced Monte covered the distance between him and his visitor in a single stride.

"They tell me ther you ar' Rosebud Rhoderick," he said, looking Velvet Van in the face.

"Do you believe it?"

"I did not, but ef yer say so—"

"I am Rhoderick! Your lasso has encircled my neck, Merced—I have felt it tighten. I owe you a terrible vengeance for ther hangin' seven years ago; but you know what I've told you. Ther time has come for ther first big blow ag'in' Satan's Own."

"Ter-night?"

"Now! We ar' all hyer. I looked fer yer first at yer own shanty, but not findin' yer ther, my next strike war for Owlet's cabin. Don't laugh an' say it's twenty ag'in' one. I'll show yer suthin' within ther next three minutes, ther'll enlarge yer eyes. My pards hev come ter time."

Merced Monte seemed to increase an inch in stature, as he shot Velvet Van a defiant look.

"All right, ef yer think yer kin play this game out," he said. "What ar' you three ter ther Desperate Dozen?"

"We three? Rather say we thirty, Merced."

"Whar's yer thirty?" cried the big sport, with a derisive sneer.

"Come an' see."

The Man from Nowhar turned about and gave Merced Monte a look of command. The desperado of Satan's Own saw the revolver he carried at his side.

"I'd like ter see yer thirty, hang me ef I wouldn't!" he sneered. "They're all in yer mind, Velvet; they're not in this camp ter-night."

There was no answer, only a smile of mystery at the corners of Velvet Van's mouth.

He knew what he was about.

Merced Monte walked beside him toward Wisdom Bill's den.

"Great heavens!" he suddenly exclaimed, whirling upon the Man from Nowhar. "You've got a hull army hyer!"

"Only thirty," was the answer. "But thirty kings ov ther border trigger!"

It was no trouble to see that the famous whisky trap was completely surrounded by stalwart

figures, that stood like statues in the starlight, and that each man carried a Winchester in the hollow of his left arm.

The sight almost sent Merced Monte staggering back.

"We've got in ther ther galoots who didn't flay Fin Fin," said Velvet Van, pointing toward the shanty. "Walk in, Merced, an' take a look at yer pards."

Merced Monte hesitated, but Velvet Van's hand encircled his own and led him forward.

"Don't be stubborn; ther boys won't like it," was spoken at his ear. "They want ter see ther leader. Go inside, Merced."

By this time the two sports had reached the door of the trap, and Velvet Van's foot kicked it open.

"Yer cap'n, gents," he exclaimed. "Walk in, Merced."

A sudden bound impelled Merced Monte into the shanty, and the next moment he halted before a number of men who gave utterance to his name.

"How did they get ther upper hand thus?" cried the leader of the Dozen.

"Walked in hyer an' took it," answered Crystal Jack.

"Whar's ther Chinaman?"

"Thar's his blood on yon board. Ther Man from Nowhar cut 'im loose!"

Merced Monte was silent for a moment, then said in a cold whisper:

"Ther hand we play must win!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE INS AND THE OUTS.

It was curious to see the roughs of Satan's Own stare at the man who made the startling declaration that the armed crowd outside was to be fought.

"Tell me what happened hyer since I left," continued Merced, turning to Crystal Jack.

"Give me ther hull story, an' be quick about it."

"Thar ain't much ter tell," was the answer.

"We hed ther almond-eyed heathen on ther board when yer went away. We took a square drink all around afore we went at ther skinnin' process. Ther Celestial never opened his head; thar he laid ez mute ez an oyster, an' didn't seem ter keer whether it war poker er flayin'. Mebbe we lost a few minutes in seein' thar our knives war in proper order, an' when we went ter work they made some good slashes on his yaller hide. All at once ther door opened. Bill looked up an' says he: 'Great God!' Then we all turned round, an' thar stood ther Man from Nowhar, backed by five men who hed us already kivered with Winchesters. We could do nothin'. They hed ther drop on us, cap'n. It war ther coolest game I've ever seen played durin' my career, an' I've seen some cool ones."

"An' Velvet Van cut ther Chinaman loose?" said Merced impatiently.

"Yes. He war kivered by ther rifles when he walked forward for ther purpose. Fin Fin got up, grinned devilishly at our lay-out, picked up his cue an' walked off. Thet's all ther war ov ther. When Velvet Van went off we broke fer ther door ready for a fuss, but war met by more'n six men—men with Winchesters. We war surrounded!"

Crystal Jack ceased and stepped to the bar with the expression of a man made very thirsty by speaking.

"No drinks," said Merced sternly, divining Crystal Jack's purpose. "We win this game sober; we drink afterward."

"D'yer expect ter turn ther tables on ther parys out thar?"

"I do."

"It's almighty big odds seein' thar we're ther besieged party," said Crystal Jack.

"It's ther Dozen's fight for life," was the answer. "Heaven knows whar ther Man from Nowhar mustered his galoots. We'll find out after ther battle. I swear—"

Merced Monte was interrupted by a voice from the outside.

"Bedrock Burt!" called the voice.

One of 'be men before Merced started visibly showing that he bore the name mentioned.

"They want you out thar, Bedrock," said the gold sport.

The man did not move.

"Pards ov Satan's Own, you will march out hyer as yer names are called," continued the voice. "We have called Bedrock Burt. He is in thar. We will call one man at a time."

"What if he should disobey?" roared Merced, whirling toward the door.

"We'll kill him in his boots! Come out, Bedrock Burt."

The tough of this name shut his teeth hard, looked at his companions and took a step toward the door which stood wide open.

"I see through ther scheme," he said suddenly, shrinking back. "They want us one by one. They hev a halter out thar for ther Dozen. By ther eternal heavens! I'll die hyer first. Call for Bedrock till ye'r' hoarse, wolves ov ther noose!"

"All right! You've made yer choice," was the answer, and the next second the crack of a Winchester was followed by the forward plunge of a man who fell headlong at the door!

"Texas Sol!" was the next man called, and

the name was spoken amid the echoes of the one death-shot.

"Mebbe ye'd better go out," said Merced in a whisper as he glanced at the giant whose movements told that he was the man called.

Texas Sol looked at the pard lying at the door and then let his gaze wander into the street.

"Texas Sol! we call but twice," said the same stern voice again.

"Hyer he comes!" was the response and the next moment the rough bounded forward, sprung over the body of Bedrock Burt and landed several feet beyond the threshold.

Quick upon the bound sounded a half suppressed cry, at which Merced Monte and one half of his followers started forward.

"The man who comes out without orders dies like the man who refuses ter come when called!"

Merced halted; the men involuntarily drew back.

"It's ther end," growled Crystal Jack. "We've struck a lottery in which thar ar' no blanks. Ther Dozen die like dogs in ther kennel. If thar ar' ter be no resistance, let me go out an' drop whar Texas is!"

"Not yet," said Merced Monte, clutching the speaker's sleeve. "I've got a scheme."

"One thet'll win ag'in thet crowd out thar?"

"Yes."

"Then, for heaven's sake play it. Not a moment is ter be lost. My name may be ther next called—"

"Crystal Jack!"

"Jehosaphat! I told yer so. Play yer hand, cap'n. For God's sake, play it quick."

"They'll call yer ag'in."

"Mebbe so."

"When they do walk ter ther door, an' shut it!"

"What, then?"

"We'll put out ther light."

Merced Monte had scarcely finished when there was a second call for Crystal Jack.

"Do it," whispered Merced. "It is a part ov my scheme."

"I'll try it," answered the summoned desperado, as he walked forward.

The roughs of Satan's Own held their breath as they watched him. He walked straight toward the door as if he intended to continue into the clutches of the cool regulators outside.

But at the very threshold he sprung suddenly aside, and instead of passing into the street he grasped the heavy door and swung it to in the faces of the men beyond it.

At the same moment Merced Monte darted at the lamp that hung against the wall at one end of the counter, and in an instant the room was enveloped in Egyptian gloom!

"Flat on the floor!" said Merced, in a whisper, and every living man went down.

Not a moment too soon was this done, for a dozen bullets crashed through the planks that formed Wisdom Bill's place, throwing splinters all over the prostrate roughs and causing them to grip their revolvers more firmly than before!

"By Jericho! it is a scheme, isn't it?" exclaimed Crystal Jack, while the bullets whistled over his head. "I've seen Merced cornered afore ter-night, an' a scheme ov some kind allus let 'im out. I wonder what's ter be ther next move?"

After the dozen shots a strange silence reigned on the outside, and while it lasted Merced Monte crept to the door and listened.

Three minutes later he came back to his anxious and breathless men.

"Thar'll be no fightin' unless we force it," he said. "We hold the fort at present. Daylight will show us whar to shoot."

"They'll never wait till then," was the reply.

"Ef they do they're fools. Ther Man from Nowhar ar' no idiot. He knows better than ter charge us in the dark. Ther volley war fired without his orders; his men did it."

As there was no answer, the roughs of the camp continued to hug the floor in the thick darkness that enveloped them.

There was something wildly thrilling in the desperadoes stretched out on the floor expecting another volley from the foe outside. Wisdom Bill had crawled into a very small space under his counter, among cobwebs and kegs.

"When I git out o' this it'll be ter immigrate ter more congenial quarters," said the liquor-seller, under his breath. "Ther climate hyar hez changed too suddenly to suit me. I wculdn't stay hyar ef I could sell whisky at two dollars a gill. No siree, Wisdom Bill. You must waltz."

"Look!" suddenly said a voice among the breathless group on the floor, and at the same time a hand touched Merced Monte's arm. "By ther livin' soul! thar's a match at ther corner ov ther shanty!"

"An' a dead man!" grated Merced, as he crawled away.

Nobody heard the king of Satan's Own crawl across the floor: no one saw him.

He made directly for the spot where the light was seen, and put his eye to a crack between two boards.

"Goin' ter scorch us out, eh?" hissed Merced as in the flame of a match he saw the figure of a man near the corner of the shanty. "It's ther last lucifer ye'll ever strike. Ye'll almost beat Bedrock Burt ter perdition!"

The next moment the revolver of the moun-

tain rough was at the crevice, and the man in the act of igniting some light material which had been piled against the building was completely covered.

Merced Monte looked over the shining barrel into the regulator's face, but before he could press the trigger, he saw a figure leap to the man's side and a hand closed on his wrist.

"None of this kind of work! You might burn up the wrong man!" the interferer said.

Merced recoiled with a cry, for the speaker was Canyon Clara, his wife.

CHAPTER XXI.

AFTER THE TORNADO.

"SEE here. What has been done?" said this same woman as she halted before a handsome man who stood a few yards from the besieged shanty.

"Heavens! when did you come?" was the quick retort.

"A moment ago. I heard the rifle volley. Who was killed by it? I saw a match burning at the corner of that den, and I pounced upon the man who held it in time to prevent a fire. Is this the way you keep your word to me, Velvet Van? You forget that I am Merced Monte's wife. He is in there!"

"I forgot nothin'," was the answer. "I intended to spare him. I would have risked my life to save him for your sake. We came down upon the Dozen an' took 'em by surprise. We were callin' them out one by one. The first man refused to come out an' died at the door, the second man came out an' war lassoed, but Crystal Jack shut the door, an' out went the light. Then the boys fired."

"They may have killed him."

"I cannot say."

"You know he is in there?"

"I ought to. I brought him hyer myself."

Canyon Clara looked surprised into Velvet Van's face.

"You forget the band that pulled Rosebud Rhoderick up seven years ago," he said.

"An' you forget your sacred promise not to deal with my husband," she said.

"Deal with him yourself. He is in thar," said the Man from Nowhar nodding toward the whisky trap.

"We've got three out o' the Dozen within the last forty-eight hours. Montana is not in camp."

The woman glanced at the human statues standing by.

"When did these men join you?" she asked.

"To-night."

"Take them away!"

She spoke in tones of command.

"You don't know what the Satanites war doin' when we came."

"I don't care."

"They were flayin' Fin Fin alive."

"Why didn't he keep out of camp?"

"I couldn't stop him. He came hyer for vengeance."

"And shot some one?"

"Yes."

"It was blood for blood, then," observed the woman, with a smile.

If she had asked for the name of the Chinaman's victim, her eyes might have been made to flash again; but she did not, only repeated the command for Velvet Van to remove his regulators.

"Ther boys ar'n't satisfied," said the Man from Nowhar. "They'll make another swoop at the first opportunity. The Desperate Dozen is to be wiped out."

In the shanty during this conversation of the outside lay some dark forms on the floor.

Merced Monte was still crouched in one corner of the place waiting for the flash of another match.

The appearance of Canyon Clara had astonished, and, for the moment, unnerved him.

This was the woman who had forced him into matrimony at the revolver's muzzle, and now that he knew her scheme which was to prevent him from carrying out his designs against the Queen of Dirk town his hatred had increased ten-fold.

"By heavens! if ther next match reveals her beauty, I'll spoil it!" grated the desperado-sport while he waited at the crevice with one finger at the trigger. "Why should I spare the woman who hez taken up a full hand ag'in' me? My wife! Only by Parson Noll, an' that amounts ter nothin'!"

Merced Monte yearned for the glare of another match, but he was not rewarded; the silence of the grave followed the death of the first one.

He went back to his pards and dropping among them, waited for the next move.

The body of Bedrock Burt lay near the door where it had fallen. What had become of Texas Sol the besieged pards did not know.

It was after midnight whea the swoop was made; morning was not distant now.

What would be seen, what happen, in the first flashes of dawn?

One by one the roughs took courage and creeping to Wisdom Bill's bar helped themselves in the darkness to the first liquors they found. There was no remonstrance; the proprietor, huddled up under the counter among the cobwebs had

fallen asleep, and knew nothing of the repeated thefts.

Merced Monte was at a crack when the first signs of light reappeared.

He saw that the street before the cabin was clear, and he could see no men armed with Winchesters sternly facing the fort.

"They've sneaked off like cowards," exclaimed the gold-camp sport to his men. "We hevn't got a foe in front ov ther shanty. They knew we'd hev 'em at daylight, an' so Velvet Van called off his vultures. But yonder swings Tex-as Sol. They left him behind."

He opened the door as he finished, and the men who crowded forward saw a human body swinging from the corner of a cabin directly opposite the whisky-den.

With a cocked revolver in each hand Merced walked forward.

Texas Sol swung in mid-air, his death-halter the noose of a black lasso and his hands lashed to his back.

A dozen knives instantly flashed to cut the dead man down, and the body was lowered to the ground.

In one of the hands was found a paper which Merced Monte opened, and the next minute he read aloud the following to the anxious crowd:

"The next swoop will be more fatal than the first. The Desperate Dozen is a doomed organization. If they scatter they will be hunted down like single wolves. They had better remain together an' die like men."

THE RANGER REGULATORS."

Oaths of defiance greeted Merced Monte when he reached the end of the warning.

"We'll stand tergether. Let 'em come back!" exclaimed Crystal Jack. "Got ter die, eh—for what?"

A smile played with Merced's lips when he turned upon the speaker.

"Don't yer know ther old law, Crystal?" he said. "Men like us ar' always hunted. It's bound ter come—sooner or later. Our hands hev been ag'in' mankind. Mankind hev turned on us now—that's all."

Crystal Jack subsided, and glanced at the body lying at his feet.

"They mean business; look at that carkiss," said some one.

"An' at Bedrock Burt lyin' inside ov Wisdom's door. Ther Man from Nowhar is cap'n ov ther Regulators. When he walked in an' cut ther Chinaman loose last night I knowed suthin' like this'd foller. What's yer scheme now, Merced?"

"Ter fight 'em!" cried the gold-camp sport without a moment's hesitation. "Let it be Satan's Own ag'in' ther world! We kin fill our ranks, but not from such men as Dolores Dick. Over ther dead we will swear eternal war. I am ther husband ov ther woman called Canyon Clara. You saw ther marriage. Very well. Her fingers ar' deep in this. I outlaw her now an' forever. Because she is in a certain sense my wife, she must not receive mercy on that account. Hunt her down wherever you find her trail, an' that man will find Merced Monte his eternal pard who throws at his feet the head ov ther Coeur d'Leno viper! Ther paper found in Texas Sol's hand threatens a second swoop. Let it come! We ar' still ther Desperate Dozen whose deeds ar' written in red all over ther Northwest. We'll hold this camp ag'in' ther hordes ov Hades!"

Merced and the men by whom he was surrounded certainly looked capable of resisting an attack from that quarter, and the oath they took over the body of Texas Sol was terrible and impressive.

Morning had broken fairly over the camp, but not a Regulator was to be seen.

The avengers of blood had departed as quietly as they had swooped down upon Satan's Own. Merced Monte more than half expected to find his cabin occupied by the person whom he had found there on a previous occasion, and this time he was prepared to meet her.

But he was disappointed, for Canyon Clara did not confront him when he opened the door, and he found his little lamp nearly burned out on the table.

He did not stop until he had removed a block of wood from one of the logs and taken out several papers which he looked over carefully.

"I've got ther dockements yet," he said. "Nobody kin thoroughly win without these. I hold ther key. I don't care who owns ther lock. Why not make a break for Gold Canyon alone? Thar is whar Nora is. Let me git my hands on her once more, an' I'll fight ther rest ov it out alone. Ther Regulators kin come ter Satan's Own an' hang all they please; ther Man from Nowhar would find no revenge for ther hangin' seven years ago beyond seein' his men clean ther Dozen out, an' Canyon Clara couldn't prevent me from hevin' two wives. Why not go? By Jehu! I will. I'll carry a part ov this war inter Africa. My wound doesn't trouble me. Ther almond-eyed Satan didn't shoot true. Owlet may hev struck his arm just when he touched ther trigger. If so, I owe ther black-eyed feller suthin', but ef I hed found him last night, by ther seven gods! I would hev killed 'im!"

Merced Monte put the papers back into the log, fully resolved to go to Gold Canyon.

Nothing should bathe him; the beautiful young

creature known as Nugget Nora was not to be taken from him by the wiles of Canyon Clara and the coolness of Velvet Van.

"I may hev missed it somewhar along ther line, but I'll git ther yet," he said. "I may hev trusted ther pards ov Dirk town, Nora's guards—too far. They went back on me an' tried ter fool me with a corpse. But I know better now. They hold Nora for a ransom. They expect me ter plank down my dust for ther girl that b'longs ter me. Not an ounce! When I reach 'Frisco it'll not be as Merced Monte, an' she'll not be ther Queen ov Dirk town. No! Those papers will set ther city wild, an' I'll ride on ther top wave, with a cocked revolver for ther first person ther steps between."

The morning broadened and the advancing day found no little excitement in the capital of the Coeur d'Alene mountains.

The bodies of Texas Sol and Bedrock Burt, with that of the man killed by Velvet Van when he forced the Dozen back from their intended ride to Gold Canyon, were "planted" among the young timber near camp.

The desperadoes looked to their weapons, or drank over Wisdom Bill's counter.

Nobody went out on the Regulators' trail. Wisdom Bill still adhered to his expressed determination to seek a more congenial climate, and the citizens of Satan's Own who were not of the Dozen met and discussed the late events.

Montana was not present with his advice and counsel.

If it had entered Merced's mind that the long-haired sport had gone to Gold Canyon, he would not have waited for the shadows of another night.

As the day died away men cast anxious glances up at the mountains from the streets and cabins of the camp.

They wondered what another night would bring forth.

Merced Monte stole from his cabin at dusk and glided to Owlet's door.

Opening it slowly without noise he looked inside.

The little man with the black eyes had not come back.

Merced went from Owlet's shanty to the corral, where he found a horse already saddled.

"Now for ther prize!" he exclaimed. "If ther viper lives, Merced Monte will hev two wives before long."

At that moment a solitary horseman, tall and athletic, was riding through the mountains toward Satan's Own.

He had long hair and wonderfully black eyes.

"I hold all ther cards but one, Merced Monte," this man said. "I hate ter disturb yer, but I must hev that one, too."

CHAPTER XXII.

A CYCLONE IN CHINESE.

THE man with the black eyes and long hair rode into Satan's Own from the south with the first gathering shadows of another night about him.

Any inhabitant of the camp would have known him on sight for Montana, the cool head who had taken Nugget Nora from the pards of Gold Canyon.

He had come back to Satan's Own, but without the prize he had obtained, and when near the cabin he was wont to occupy, he slid from the saddle, and, while the steed moved on as if he knew the way to the old corral, he, Montana, entered the structure.

At first all was dark to him there, but by degrees he saw the table and a human figure above it with eyes fixed apparently upon him.

"What! you've come back, eh?" said a voice.

"Yes. Ilev yer changed quarters, Owlet?"

"For ther present," was the reply accompanied by a light chuckle. "Hades hez been ter pay in more ways than one since yer went away, Montana, an' I'm mixed up in ther affair ter a sartain extent. They'll never look for Owlet in Montana's shanty. He'll never come hyer for him?"

"Whom?"

"Merced."

In an instant Montana was all attention. He went forward and pushed Owlet down upon a stool beside the table while he seated himself upon the table itself.

"Tell me," he said, and the next moment Owlet's tongue was at work detailing the camp incidents of the past twenty-four hours.

"An' Merced—whar is he now?" asked Montana when the narrator rested.

"Gone by this time, I reckon."

"Gone whar?"

"Ter Gold Canyon."

"After—"

Montana paused but Owlet smiled and said:

"Yes, after her!"

A strange, victorious gleam came to the eyes of the long-haired sport.

"But he won't find her thar, will he, Montana?" continued Owlet.

Instantly Montana's brow darkened.

"What do you know?" he exclaimed, glaring down into the face below his own. "There ar' times, Owlet, my friend, when a man may know too much. Beware! You know Montana ov

Perdition Plains. Merced has gone ter Gold Canyon, eh? How d'yer know?"

" Didn't I listen at his door awhile ago?" laughed Owlet. " When he is alone an' hez a scheme afoot you kin hear a grist ov news by playin' earwig, eh, Montana? You know Merced, yer pard."

Montana made no answer.

" Gone ter Gold Canyon—gone ter-night?" he murmured. " He'll ride hard. Grass won't grow under his horse's feet. He'll find out what happened thar. He'll turn back—ter hunt his old pard, Montana."

In another moment Owlet was the only occupant of the cabin.

" Heavens! he goes off like powder!" exclaimed the man-cyclopedia of the mountain camp. " A man sometimes knows too much for his own good, eh, Montana? You have never deceived me. I kin read yer face like a book. You've been ter ther canyon an' you've got ther prize—Merced's mountain pink which he used ter say war worth her weight in pearls. Somebody's ter be folleried. Wal, it's tiger ag'in' tiger now, an' all for a girl. Oh, fer a minute's talk with Merced Monte's wife!"

Montana was already some distance from his cabin. Near the edge of the camp he was mufiling a horse's feet and having accomplished the task to his satisfaction, he vaulted into the saddle and grasped the reins.

" Gone ter Gold Canyon, eh?" he ejaculated. " It remains ter be seen whether you get thar, my old pard Merced."

Owlet looking from the door of Montana's cabin, saw a horseman come up.

Recognizing the long-haired sport he quickly drew back, but not until he had been detected by eyes that never missed anything.

" Put a soul on my track an' I'll toss ye over the wall ov Paradise!" hissed the man that leaned toward the cabin door slightly ajar. " Gone ter Gold Canyon, you say, Owlet? I haven't been hyer ter-night. Don't forget that." And straightening in his saddle, Montana dashed away without a sound.

" I'd like ter see 'em come tergether ez they will, hang me, ef I wouldn't!" said Owlet. " Think ov bein' folleried by a man like that on a hoss with muffled feet. God! he kin ride alongside an' give ther cuss ahead ther full length ov a bowie blade. He's tracked men afore on a hoss like that. A cooler head an' a bigger devil than Montana ov Perdition Plains never played fer high stakes. An' I'm not ter tell that he war hyer."

Owlet had scarcely ceased when the cabin door opened and in the gleam of the lamp lately lighted he saw the face and figure of Crystal Jack.

" Jehu! when did yer take possession ov this ranch?" cried Jack the moment he saw the startled man at the table. " Why didn't yer show up since you tussled with ther heathen?"

" I didn't hev ter," said Owlet doggedly.

" But that's not what brought me hyer. A man taller than you rode away from hyer a second ago."

" I guess not."

" Come. No hoodwinkin', Owlet. We're all pards hyer. Warn't ther man Montana?"

" I saw nobody. Throw me a Bible, Crystal Jack, an' I'll swear on top ov it that I saw no one ride away from hyer."

Owlet's voice and face were enough to deceive any one.

Crystal Jack scrutinized him keenly while he spoke.

" I never caught you in a lie, Owlet."

" No," said the little man, " an' you never will."

" By George! mebbe I war fooled," continued Crystal Jack as he went out. " If I war sure I wern't, I'd put ther Dozen on that man's heels. He made no noise when he went off—like a ghost would do."

Not quite satisfied, Crystal Jack struck a match and examined the ground outside Montana's cabin, but no hoof-prints rewarded him.

" It's devilish strange. Mebbe Merced saw him."

But the cabin of the boss of Satan's Own was empty and Crystal Jack came away more satisfied than ever.

" What's goin' ter happen?" said a tall man who halted at his side before he knew any one was near. " Merced Monte hez left us ter fight fate alone. He has ridden from camp, southward bound."

Crystal Jack seemed to recoil from the informer.

" No!" he cried.

" It's a stubborn fact, but that's not all. Montana rode through camp awhile ago on a hoss that made no noise."

" Tbet war my ghost!" cried Jack.

" Then you saw him?"

" Yes," said Crystal Jack. " He came back ter camp an' slipped out ag'in. Montana never muffles his horses' for nothin'. Merced is ahead ov him, eh?"

" Yes."

" You, Lightnin' Hank, want ter go ter Wisdom's an' post ther pards thar. Tell 'em ter meet me secretly at my shanty. This bizness means suthin'. Merced leaves camp; Montana

comes back an' goes arter him alone, his horse's feet ar' muffled. We must all go south mubbe; but ther consultation will determine that."

" I don't go," said Lightning Hank. " I'm goin' ter stay hopin' that Velvet Van an' pards will come back soon. I want blood."

" We'll all git enough ov that afore this game's played through," smiled Crystal Jack. " You'll tell ther boys, won't yer?"

" I'll do that."

Crystal Jack was alone once more.

" Any man with one eye kin see that ther Queen ov Dirkton is now ther stake in ther game," he said to himself. " Merced is bound for Gold Canyon, with Montana behind him. An' the feet ov one man's hoss ar' muffled! By Heavens! I'll know what that means!"

Meanwhile, Lightning Hank was proceeding to Wisdom Bill's to invite the gold-camp pards to the conference at Crystal Jack's cabin. He stalked into the room to find four men sampling the contents of a very black bottle that stood on the counter, and over it was a freshly written placard bearing the inscription:

" Gone ter a better land."

WISDOM BILL.

" Funeral meats, Lightnin'!" laughed one of the quartette, as he pointed at the placard, and then looked invitingly at the bottle. " We war just drinkin' ther health ov ther departed."

The sight of a free drink was too much for Hank to resist, and he was soon inspecting the announcement of departure through the bottom of a glass.

He quite forgot his errand, and after several drinks he did not think of Crystal Jack waiting impatiently at the rendezvous.

All at once the door of the den opened slowly, and as the backs of the five men were turned to it they did not see the figure that crept forward.

A pair of sloe-black but queer-looking eyes were fastened on the roughs, and the hand that hung at the visitor's right side carried a knife with a remarkable blade.

" Hyer's ter ther hand that wins—which belongs ter us!" suddenly cried Lightning Hank. " Toss down ther fluid, pards! No man cows Satan's Own an' lives ter boast ov it. He—Jehosaphat! ther clipped heathen, with a knife!"

Lightning Hank's ejaculation was enough to make all wheel toward the door, and just in time to see a man spring forward, as a wild cry for vengeance leaped from his throat.

Straight at Lightning Hank flew the clipped Chinaman, the slender-bladed bowie in mid-air, and with eyes afame.

The five men reached for their weapons, but the swiftest hand was not quick enough.

Fin Fin came down upon Lightning Hank like the swoop of an eagle, his left hand closed on the rough's dark throat, and before one could tear him loose the bowie descended.

It needed no second stroke. Fin Fin dropped his victim as he wrenched the knife away, and sweeping it about his head endangered for a moment the bodies of the astonished four.

" One fer Fin Fin's cue, anyhow!" cried the heathen. " Van an' pards takee rest, mebbe!"

That was all. Something darted across the room, and went out at the door like a rocket—all before a single revolver could cover it.

" Ye gods! I've heard ov swoops afore, but that one takes ther bun," said one of the four, whose feet touched the body lying at the foot of the blood-flecked counter. " Who war lookin' for ther Chinese cyclone? Lightnin' Hank ther least ov all ov us. No use ter foller that storm; let it go. Is Hank dead?"

The speaker stooped over the bowied pard.

Yes; Lightning Hank was dead, and with his message undelivered.

Crystal Jack, waiting at his shanty for the Dozen to come, grew impatient.

Precious minutes were flying into the past.

Montana must be nearing the man ahead of him—nearing him on a muffled horse.

All at once he rushed from his shanty, and hurried toward Wisdom Bill's.

He sprung across the threshold, and saw the four pards lifting Lightning Hank from the floor.

" Who did this?" cried Jack. " I sent that man ter yer with a message."

" Wal, he never delivered it. Ther clipped heathen interfered."

" An' whar is he?"

" He got away."

" Not arter doin' that in yer presence?"

" Yes; ther quick work paralyzed us. Hank's life paid for ther pig-tail we clipped. Did yer want us, Crystal?"

" I did; but it's too late, now."

Yes, it was too late. The undelivered message had changed the mountain game; Fin Fin's knife had altered affairs.

CHAPTER XXIII.

PARD AND PARD.

GREAT stakes are often risked on a single card, and on a single hand sometimes depend important games.

Lightning Hank's failure to deliver Crystal Jack's message to the four pards at Wisdom Bill's had cost him his life. Not only that, but it had left the man on the muffled horse unfol-

lowed, when if he had been promptly trailed, certain events might have been prevented.

Montana, the long-haired, left Satan's Own with the intention of overtaking Merced, who was bound for Gold Canyon.

He knew the trail thither, for he had lately traveled it in company with Jasper Jim and afterward back to the mountain not all the way alone.

Merced had the start of him, but Montana's horse took him rapidly over the trail, and the early stars of morning found him nearing a man who was riding along confident that he was not followed, at least not by the man who had been his pard for years.

" It'll never do ter let him git ter Gold Canyon an' diskiver that I walked off with ther girl," said Montana in audible tones to himself. " He'd come back an' hunt me. He'd be on ther lookout; he'd hold ter ther papers he carries next ter his skin, an' give me no chance ter scoop 'em. No! ther man ahead ov me must never see Gold Canyon!"

Speaking thus, the long-haired desperado rode on. At last he reined in his horse, leaned forward and listened.

" I've overtaken him," he ejaculated. " I've struck him about whar I expected ter. I guess our partnership will end before mornin', Merced."

Montana's steed went forward cautiously now. The muffled hoofs were doing their secret work, and the hand that had muffled them now carried at full cock a heavy revolver which it knew so well how to handle.

Presently Montana saw a moving figure ahead, and then he made out the form of a man bolt upright in a saddle and riding leisurely along.

" Merced Monte! I'd know him in the dark!" exclaimed Montana. " Thar'll be a surprised man in less than five minutes. Oh, they never beat the hand Montana plays—especially when the stake is a girl an' a fortune!"

The two horses kept on; the trail under their hoofs was yielding and gave forth no sound.

Montana guided his horse to one side, as he neared the man ahead, and all at once raising a hand he let it drop suddenly upon the shoulder of Merced Monte.

The boss of Satan's Own started in his stirrups.

" Great God! you, Montana?" he cried looking into the triumphant face at his shoulder.

" You must hev muffled Jupiter's feet."

" Mebbe I hev," answered Montana with a laugh. " Goin' ter Gold Canyon on yer own hook, eh, Merced?"

Merced Monte shut his lips and his eyes flashed: " What if I am?"

The men rode silent side by side for a moment.

" Thar's no use in yer goin' ter Gold Canyon," suddenly continued Montana. " Ther pards ov Dirkton hev gone back on yer, an' ther man who blanched yer cheeks with ther hoax ov ther black plague will never spin another yarn."

" Why won't he?"

" Because he's dead."

" Jasper Jim?" cried Merced.

" Killed by Shasta Saul."

" Who told yer?"

" No one. I saw him do it."

" Then you've been with 'em?"

Montana laughed till Merced Monte's eyes seemed to burn.

" All truce aside, Merced, I've been ter ther Canyon ahead ov yer," he said, assuming soberness in an instant. " Don't stare yer eyes out at Montana. I've stated a hard, cold fact. I went down with Jasper Jim—I caught him in camp an' made him take me ter ther new rendezvous."

" An' you saw Nora?"

" Yes."

" Wal, what do they intend doin'?"

" They expect ter hunt me ter 'Frisco ef I go thar, I expect."

" You?—what for?"

" I got away with 'em."

" You didn't shoot anybody, Montana?" cried Merced Monte.

" Shasta Saul did all ther shootin' thar war," was the reply.

" Then—"

" I beat 'em in another way. Merced, I've concluded ter play for ther same stake that keeps yer so busy. I've got ther death drop on yer. Look inter ther dropper ov Montana from Perdition Plains, an' read bizness thar!"

The horses were so close now that the legs of their riders touched.

The left hand of Montana had fallen upon Merced Monte's shoulder, and the right was holding a revolver in his face.

" I play for ther Queen ov Dirkton, too," continued the long-haired sport. " I hold all ther cards but one, an' I want it now. You'll not find Nugget Nora at Gold Canyon. I've been thar, an' because I war, ther pards ov ther new camp ar' ready ter hunt this individual ter Texas. Now, give me ther last card—ther papers under yer shirt."

" You must be crazy!" ejaculated Merced Monte. " I'm no mail-bag."

" Never the less, thar ar' papers under yer shirt. I want 'em!"

The pistol seemed to creep closer than ever to the gold sport's head, and behind it he saw the cold, merciless eyes of Montana.

"When did you turn robber?" cried Merced. "Beware! you swore with us all the oath ov ther Desperate Dozen."

"Hang ther Dozen! Merced, thet girl's gotter be an angel. Jehu! what a figger she'd cut in 'Frisco er Denver! Ye war a fool ter risk all thet beauty in ther clutches ov ther pards ov Dirltown. Don't try ter bluff Montana. I'll take ther papers now."

Merced Monte's hand left the revolver to which it had dropped at Montana's first word.

It went upward to his bosom, and met the other one there.

"Hyer!" he said. "Search my anatomy!" and wheeling upon Montana, he tore open his shirt and bared his breast for inspection.

Montana leaned forward with curiosity in his eyes.

"If I hed important papers I wouldn't carry them wherever I went," he went on. "What d'yer find, Montana?—any dockermens ov value?"

It was evident that Montana was disappointed.

"This ends our pardship. You want the prize thet b'longs ter me. We both can't wear ther same gem—"

"No," said Montana, straightening, but with a steady hand keeping Merced Monte covered with the revolver. "Don't I know thet one ov these days you war goin' ter make Nora yer wife, we'll say—an' then plank down sartain papers thet d' stir all 'Frisco? She warn't a beauty when I saw her last; she war a mere child. But Jehu! look at her now, Merced. War it Dirltown thet fetched her out?"

"No difference what developed her," said Merced Monte. "I've watched her from a child."

"But yer can't marry her. You've got a wife now."

Merced's teeth met madly.

"I witnessed ther wedding," continued Montana, laughing. "Thar war no cards, but a revolver, an' no weddin' tour. Ther brido war willin' but ther bridegroom kicked. Men can't hev more 'n one wife at once exceptin' in Utah. Ye'r no Mormon, Merced!"

"An' no fool either!" roared the boss of Satan's Own. "I'm goin' ter fight ther hull conspiracy ag'in' me. I know why Canyon Clara bound her life ter mine. I know thet Velvet Van is Rosebud Rhoderick. Montana, I dare yer ter lower yer pistol an' go on ther same heart hunt with Monte from Merced."

"Which means that you want me ter help make a widower, so ye kin play yer last big hand for Nora. Wal, I guess not, Merced. Our pardship ends hyer. Yer hoss may go on ter Gold Canyon, but you stop hyer."

Montana's hand fell from Merced's shoulder as he finished, and over the revolver-barrel, glittering in the starlight, he looked with blazing eyes.

"Down with that revolver!" sung out a voice not far away. "The person of the man it covers is sacred."

Montana turned half-way around and uttered a savage oath.

"Sacred ter whom?" he cried.

"To his wife!"

Merced Monte's lips parted to give utterance to a strange cry.

"Turn your back on Merced Monte and ride off," continued the interferer who had disclosed her identity. "If I am not obeyed within thirty seconds, Perdition Plains will have no representative in these parts. Go back, or die!"

Montana saw the dark figure of a horse a few feet from the spot where he sat spell-bound in the saddle. He thought he saw in the saddle the well-rounded figure of Canyon Clara, or Crimson Crissie, the woman who years before had driven him from Santa Fe.

He shut his teeth hard, but gripped his revolver more firmly than ever.

"Not eunched but only bluffed," he hissed. "If I don't show this Coeur d'Lene viper a dandy trick, may I land in Paradise by daylight."

He turned his horse's head toward Satan's Own.

"Forward, now!" said Canyon Clara. "Back to the mountain lair, Montana. Your arm will be needed there before long."

The long-haired sport said nothing, but moved away with more avidity than one might have expected.

"Now for ther trick!" he suddenly cried. "I'll show this woman that I hold no lives sacred at her commands. I'll make her a widow by ther trigger's decree!"

He turned quickly in his saddle, and thrust his weapon toward a dark figure just visible down the trail.

The next instant the loud report of a revolver awoke the sleeping echoes of the place, and the figure fired at sprung up, and then pitched to the ground!

"I guess they know now that Montana's a bad man ter fool with," he said coolly. "I never play a cold card like that only when I have ter. Mebbe I hed better go ter ther girl now. Ther prize ar' mine. I brought her up from Gold Canyon. I've killed Merced ter make myself

solid. Ther viper may try her sting now. Wal, let her try!"

Down the trail dashed the long-haired sport, still carrying in his right hand the weapon which had doubtless dropped Merced Monte dead from the saddle. The night wind blew his raven hair behind his sombrero, and toyed with his long mustache.

He did not halt until deep in the mountains, when he sprung from the saddle, and entered a cavern well concealed by a net work of vines and heavy bowlders.

He went down a low, dark corridor, and came suddenly upon a little chamber lighted by a lamp.

He was greeted by a beautiful young girl, to whose side he sprung, and into whose eyes he looked with a desperado's triumph.

"How long am I to stay here?" asked the girl.

"Not twenty-four hours longer," was the answer. "I've played a hand to-night that opens ther gates of fortune ter you, Nora. You kin tie ter Montana. I have but one more card ter play. Wait for me hyer."

He dropped the hand he held, and went away.

"Ther paper warn't on Merced's person, consequently they're in his shanty," he said.

He galloped toward Satan's Own, now, as if he had devils at his heels. He was running a race against the approaching dawn.

He dashed into the camp and drew rein before Merced's cabin.

Ten minutes later he came out with a look of triumph on his countenance.

"Beat me now, beat hades!" he cried. "Ther game is now my own. Heavens! what a hand I hold!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

A ROUGH DIVORCE.

"WHAT do you think of it? He isn't badly injured by the shot Montana fired in the starlight; it has rendered him flighty for the time being. Can we put any confidence in his ravings?"

The speaker was Canyon Clara, and she addressed a handsome man in buckskin and velvet, in the first light of morning, a short distance where Montana had met Merced Monte, as already described.

"What did he talk about last?" queried Velvet Van.

"About Nora and the papers hidden in his cabin. When he is in his right mind, he talks of nothing but vengeance."

"Hadn't I better see him?"

"Perhaps."

The Man from Nowhar walked down the mountain-pass, in which the above conversation took place, and turning suddenly to one side, entered a very narrow way in which he came suddenly upon a large man lying on a blanket.

This person had his head bandaged with a handkerchief, and the moment he saw Velvet Van his eyes flashed.

"I've got at yer at last," he said. "Rosebud Rhoderick, ye'r goin' ter pay ther Desperate Dozen for ther hangin' matinee ov seven years ago!"

"Who has a better right to settle that score?" said Velvet Van.

"No one. It is your hour. But Jehu! wouldn't I like ter turn on ther man who shot back in ther dark last night?"

"You'd hunt Montana, eh?"

"Try me! Help me up an' throw me ag'in' a hoss!" cried Merced Monte. "Pard though he has been, I'd show him ther road thet ends at ther gates of perdition. Muffled his animile's feet last night, he did, an' follerred me!"

"When you war goin' ter Gold Canyon?"

"Who told yer?"

"Never mind."

"Yes, I war goin' thar, but he had got ahead ov me."

Velvet Van did not speak for a moment. Folding his arms upon his breast, he looked down at the man at his feet.

"Merced," he said, suddenly. "I am goin' after ther papers."

"What papers?"

"The ones hidden in the log in yer cabin at Satan's Own."

"Thar ar' no papers thar. I never keep papers."

The man in velvet smiled.

"We'll see ther log, anyhow," he said. "You will be comfortable hyer. Yer wife will keep you company."

"An' I warn her ter keep her distance," grated Merced. "If I kin, I'll throttle her. By the souls ov the dead! I'll play a death hand if Canyon Clara comes within reach. Rosebud Rhoderick, Satan's Own may prove a trap."

"All risks assumed!" laughed Velvet Van, and the next moment Merced Monte was alone once more.

"Goin' ter camp arter ther papers, is he? Who gave 'em away? I hevn't been out o' my head since Montana shot, hev I? Great Caesar! what ef I hev located ther dockermens since in a fit ov delirium? Fer ther love of Heaven! whar's my horse?"

He got upon his feet assisted by the mountain wall near by and glared wildly around.

"Montaca got ther girl an' Velvet Van goin'

arter ther papers! This will never do. Ef I hev been off since ther last shot, I'm a' right now. Half an inch ter ther left, Montana, an' ye'd hev bored Merced's brain-box; but as it is, that's life an' vengeance in ther gold sport yet."

By this time Velvet Van had gone back to the beautiful woman waiting for him a short distance from the spot.

"He denies everything now," said the man from Nowhar. "I ride to Satan's Own."

"Be on your guard. You know the tigers there."

"I have visited the den before. Watch our patient down thar. He must not follow me."

"He shall be watched," said Canyon Clara and Velvet Van leaped upon a horse which started off the moment he touched the saddle.

"Now I will look after our prisoner," said the woman, moving back to where Merced Monte had been left. "If Van finds the papers, the game will soon be played through. Ah! Merced Monte is asleep."

Lying on the blanket near the rocky wall was stretched the stalwart figure of the boss of Satan's Own, apparently in deep slumber.

Canyon Clara saw the closed eyes and noticed the regular movement of the desperado's bosom.

"Come near enough, my white viper," said Merced Monte, to himself, when from under his long black lashes he saw the woman who had halted within a few feet of him. "I've set a death trap for you, if you will but enter it. Can't I bring you up? I'll try a game, anyhow."

A moment later Merced's lips moved like the lips of a person talking in his sleep, and some incoherent sentences reached the woman's ears.

She started at the first sound and then stole forward on tip-toe, her dark eyes riveted upon the gold-camp sport.

All the time Merced watched her with the gaze of a serpent.

"Comin' right inter ther trap!" he ejaculated.

"By Jehu! this is better fortune than I expect-ed. Who says that two bullets breaks ther hand I hold?"

Merced Monte's mutterings continued to attract his mountain bride; her eyes were filled with curiosity which increased as she advanced.

Halting at Merced's side, she leaned forward and listened.

The anaconda of the mountains had drawn the bird into his folds!

All at once the pretended sleeper sprung up with a cry of triumph.

A pair of bronze hands went over Canyon Clara's neck and she started back—too late!

"Thought I war a-sleepin', beauty, eh?" cried Merced. "Ther next time ye'll look inter mountain traps like ther one thet's caught yer! I hevn't touched yer since Parson Noll made us man an' wife in Satan's Own. They say yo hev half a dozen names. Velvet Van hez gone ter camp, eh?"

The surprise had been so sudden and complete that Canyon Clara seemed to have lost her voice.

The grip of Merced was like the tightening of a viso of steel, and the eyes that blazed in his head told her that she should expect no mercy at his hands.

"What's all yer huntin' for?" he went on. "You've told me thet you married me to prevent me from winnin' ther girl called Nugget Nora. You didn't love Merced Monte?"

"I hate him from the ground up!" was the answer.

"An' yet at ther revolver's muzzle you made 'im marry you?"

"I did."

There was triumph in the woman's eyes as she spoke these words.

"Is Nora related ter you?" asked Merced.

"No."

"Yet, you risk yer life ter keep Merced Monte from marryin' her?"

"Yes."

"Ah! you think ther' ar' papers ov importance somewhar."

"I know it."

"Do you think I hev 'em?"

"You have."

"I see through ther game now," laughed Merced. "Fool! why didn't I see it before? Velvet Van an' you ar' playin' for a bonanza which you think belongs ter Nora. She owns nothin' ov ther kind. He hez gone arter certain papers which he will not find, an' you—you ar' ter die at yer husband's hands."

There was no answer beyond the desiant look in Canyon Clara's eyes.

"Did ther Ranger-Regulators go back?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Will they swoop upon ther camp any more?"

"Ask their leader!"

"Almighty definite!" laughed Merced. "I guess now thet I'll settle with you. Ther man who went to Satan's Own may find me ther afore he quits it. Huntin' sartain papers, eh? Wal, they'd do 'im no good ef he had 'em."

Merced Monte strode out from the stone wall with his grip still on the prize he had cunningly captured.

"No weddin'-tour, eh, Canyon Clara?" he laughed. "Men don't act this way often, but Merced Monte plays his own game through with-

out help. See! I transfer my hand ter yer throat, thus! I look inter yer eyes while I choke yer. By Jupiter! woman, that's a thousand men west ov ther Rockies who'd fight for beauty like yours; but I prefer ther Queen ov Dirktown."

His left hand had caught the white throat of the woman in its clutches, and he laughed devilishly while he forced her back.

She could not gasp; the closing of the bronzed hand was too quick for that; it grew tighter and tighter until her eyes seemed to start from her head.

"This is a divorce she warn't lookin' for!" cried Merced. "It is ov ther kind that passes through no courts; no evidence is needed—only a sentence ov death! Ther man that shot me, an' ther sport who went ter camp for my papers will soon find that ther old tiger ov Merced is on ther track. Death only dulls his claws. She is losing her beauty now!" he exclaimed, looking into the face quite black above his hand. "Her marriage war a bad investment. Ther cards she played hev fallen inter Merced Monte's hands. Good-by, Canyon Clara. Merced Monte's bride, farewell!"

He turned and dropped his victim at the foot of the mountain wall, then looked down at his work for a moment.

"She thought ther old fox war asleep, ha, ha!" he laughed. "If ther g'loot from Nowhar warter come back now, what would he say? But I'll tell him in camp, mebbe, that his female pard hez taken on a pair ov wings."

Going back to his blanket Merced Monte caught it up and threw it over the body at the foot of the wall.

"My wife, yer know?" he said, as if addressing some one, and then he walked away.

Gliding down the trail, he came rather suddenly upon a horse which he knew had been ridden by the woman left behind.

"We will soon see who wins," he said, reaching the animal's side and helping himself into the saddle. "I hope I'll find 'em both at camp—Velvet Van an' Montana. Both know that I shoot on sight, an' that I rarely fail ter kill. Ther only man I failed on war Velvet, but ther next time that will be no miss."

He rode back past the woman lying under the blanket, and looked at her with triumphant eyes.

"If necessary I'd take an oath hyar ter treat all my enemies thus!" he said. "Oh, for a trigger in Satan's Own at this time!"

He rode on, nor looked back to see the blanket move, and when he had passed out of sight a human figure crept out from under it.

"'Merican Merced no look to see who creapeo under blankee," grinned this person. "Him go to camp an' meet his matches there. Fin Fin kill one man for the one they took. Him kill more by 'm by. Wife no chokee bad after all!"

The heathen walked along the stone wall and darted suddenly out of sight.

Ten minutes later there appeared in the same pass a well-built man in miner garments, high boots, a rough sombrero, and well-armed.

"'Merican men no knowee Fin Fin," the man laughed. "Hair all gone, an' eyes fixed right."

It was the Chinaman under a disguise hard to penetrate. There was nothing to give him away now but his pigeon English, and that he might guard.

When he started off it was toward Satan's Own, but instead of proceeding to the desperadoes' camp he followed hoof-prints to a certain place, and all at once he disappeared in a vine and rock guarded opening.

The Chinaman crept forward on his hands and knees through pitch darkness for a few moments, and then heard a voice ahead exclaim:

"Who is there? If it is you, Montana, come straight forward. I am here."

There was no audible reply.

"Fin Fin on right tiackee at last," murmured, the Celestial crouching in the darkness. "Nugget Nora is the bird in nestee. 'Merican Merced lose her forever now!"

Several minutes of profound silence followed the voice the Chinaman had heard.

"Merciful heavens! can it be that some wild animal has found me?" ejaculated the same voice, now couched in accents of terror. "Oh, Montana! Montana! Better that I had never been born. Then men would not hate and fight for me!"

Fin Fin did not move.

His keen ears caught every sound.

"Girl ahead worth her weight in gold," he said. "Mebbe Fin Fin be a bonanza king one o' these times. Ho! ho! what if he beatee Merced, Montana an' Velvet Van all together? 'Merican man big fool after all! Fin Fin hold thumps to-nightee!"

CHAPTER XXV.

BEATEN BY A LIE.

"HALT thar! Down ye go if yer throw yer hand toward yer dropper! This time we've caught ther ghost."

Montana the long-haired heard these startling words shortly after he emerged from Merced Monte's shanty with eyes filled with triumph.

He had ridden back to Satan's Own after his encounter with Merced on the Gold Canyon trail, he had visited the cabin where he had found certain papers in one of the logs, and when he was about to go back to the girl concealed in the mountain cavern he found himself confronted by Crystal Jack and three members of the Desperate Dozen.

His horse stood ready to be mounted in front of the cabin, but he dared not leap to saddle.

"Whar's Merced?" questioned Crystal Jack.

"How should I know?" growled the long-haired sport.

"No foolin' with this crowd, cap'n. It's three ov ther Dozen ag'in' one, an' ther three hev ther drop. Ye've been hyer afore ter-night. Look at yer horse's feet. Don't we know that when you muffed them a man's ter be hunted? You've found Merced!"

"So you say."

"Did yer hev a collision?"

"No man has a right ter question Montana ov Perdition Plains!" cried the sport his figure seeming to increase in stature. "Least ov all, shall ther men he trained ter lasso an' trigger try him by pistol jury."

He took one step toward his horse, but the leader of the Dozen was not to be bluffed. Crystal Jack was loyal to Merced Monte yet.

"Another step, Cap'n Montana, an' ye'll touch yer hoss, dead!" came sternly over the leveled revolver. "Throw up yer hands an' walk toward Wisdom Bill's. Forward!"

Montana looked amazed.

"What kind of pardship is this?" he cried.

"It's only ther old oath we took in ther kentry ov ther Basaltic Buttes. Ef one pard trails another, he shall die!"

"Prove that I've trailed Merced!"

"Thet's what we may do. Ef innocent why all this kickin', Montana? What's an hour er two? Forward, toward Bill's. It'll be a dangerous game fer yer ter touch a dropper."

Montana bit his lips.

"Give me half a chance an' I'll drop these men like beeves," he said under his breath. "Dare they attempt to hold me hyer till they've found Merced dead whar I tumbled him from ther saddle? I've got ther papers under my shirt. What ef they should search me?"

He talked thus while he marched sullenly toward the rendezvous of the pards of Satan's Own covered by the revolvers of the four pards and watched closely by all.

It was a short march.

One of the men sprung forward, kicked the door open and lit the lamp.

Montana marched straight into the place.

"Now, bring on yer witnesses," he demanded, facing Crystal Jack and his pards.

"Thar can be but one witness in this case," was the answer. "I'm goin' for him now. I'll take yer hoss, Montana. He knows ther way ter Merced Monte."

The mountain sport saw Crystal Jack walk to the door and from the saloon.

"You'll find that party a hard set ter turn over," laughed Jack ere he left. "Merced Monte hez a hold on ther boys which nothin' kin break. His scheme saved us when ther Regulators warhyer. Try 'em while I'm gone, cap'n, an' see."

Montana looked into the faces of the three men who faced him, and saw only obedience to Crystal Jack there.

It was strange. He had led those very men in more than one desperate enterprise, they had been pards for many years, but now he had lost his influence, and Montana the long-haired was their prisoner. He could hardly credit the change, and yet when he looked into their eyes he knew that it was stern reality.

Meanwhile Crystal Jack had gone back and taken possession of the horse with muffled hoofs. As he rode down the street two eyes watched him from a half-open cabin door, and a voice exclaimed:

"Crystal Jack on Montana's horse! By Jupiter! that means something." And forth from the shanty crept Owl the black-eyed, and watched the horse and his rider out of sight.

Crystal Jack struck the right trail as if he knew where it lay.

"Proof he wants," said the gold-camp sport. "Proof, he means that he met an' killed Merced ter-night. By heavens! proof Montana shall hev if I hev ter tote ther corpse ov Merced back an' throw it at his feet! Pards we ar', but Merced is closer ter us than he. Between ther two ther Dozen loves Merced best, though Montana is ther dandiest. He saved my life in Shasta, too."

Satan's Own and it's striking tableau at Wisdom Bill's was soon left behind, and Crystal Jack rode under the early morning stars like a specter.

Suddenly he reined in his horse and listened over his fox-like ears.

"Somebody!" muttered Crystal Jack, while he listened, for he heard the rapid gallop of a horse which was approaching him.

Crystal Jack moved a little to one side and waited, and while he did so he held a cocked revolver in his right hand.

"Velvet Van, mebbe!" he ejaculated. "By heavens! I'd give my boots if it should turn out ter be ther almond-eyed son ov Satan who got

a life fer his pigtail! Wouldn't I toss some ov his brains ter ther stars!"

On, on came the horse, evidently ridden by some one.

Crystal Jack manifested no uneasiness as he came near; he seemed to be ready for any foe.

All at once a steed and his rider loomed up between the Satan's Own sport and the stars.

Crystal Jack leaned quickly forward and thrust his revolver into the man's face, at the same time uttering a stern "halt!"

"Jupiter! Crystal Jack!" exclaimed the person halted.

"Merced Monte!"

The six-shooter was lowered, and Crystal Jack gave vent to an exclamation of relief.

"I've found livin' proof instead of dead evidence," said Jack. "I war huntin' yer, Merced, but skin me for a coyote ef I expected ter strike yer in this condition! We've got a prisoner up at camp."

"Good! ther very man I want," cried Merced.

"He war comin' out o' yer shanty when four ov us got ther drop on him."

"Come! I wouldn't stop hyer a minute fer ther earth."

Crystal Jack turned his horse's head toward the gold-camp and was soon galloping toward it alongside of Merced Monte.

"He said we had no right ter question him," said Jack looking into his captain's face.

"I'll show him that I hev," was the response. "He went straight from me ter ther cabin. You hevn't given him a chance ter hide anything?"

"He's been guarded ever since we covered him."

"I'm all right, then."

Not another word was spoken until the two men rode into Satan's Own in the last lingering shadows of the eventful night.

"Whar is he?" suddenly asked Merced Monte.

"Kivered by ther pards' revolvers at Wisdom Bill's."

"I'll confront him thar. He knows that I shoot on sight."

Away dashed Merced Monte toward the famous saloon closely followed by the man who had found him on the trail.

The door stood open and the light of a lamp was seen beyond.

Revolver in hand Merced Monte leaped from the saddle and sprung across the threshold. He saw a stalwart man leaning against the counter with folded arms and confronted by three men with a revolver in each hand.

The instant Merced landed in the saloon, the man at the counter straightened and uttered a cry of astonishment.

"Merced! By heavens! I thought I had fin-ished him!" he said.

As for Merced Monte, his eyes seemed to start from his head, as he excla'med.

"Jehosaphat! it isn't the man I expected to see."

Face to face stood the two astonished sports, one at the mercy of the other and under the circumstances it was not probable that Merced would prove lenient.

Montana saw the handkerchief that bound up his rival's head, and knew that his shot in the starlight had only drawn blood.

"So they caught you, Montana," said Merced, advancing upon the long-haired sport. "Caught you comin' out o' my shanty like a thief in the night!"

"They've told yer all," was the answer.

"Thar's no use in questionin' me. Thar's yer jury, Merced; they've been watchin' me like hungry wolves for two hours. Let 'em bring in their verdict ag'in' Montana."

Merced Monte walked rapidly toward his little cabin and entered. Going straight to the log with the secret compartment, he removed the plug and thrust his hand in.

"Gone!" he cried, starting back. "One ov two men hev ther papers. Mebbe Montana got hyer too late. Ef so, then Velvet Van found ther dockermens. I'll see who has them, fer they're life itself ter me!"

He wheeled toward the door, and a moment later was making great strides toward Wisdom Bill's.

"Give them up—my dockermens!" roared the bronzed tiger of Satan's Own, throwing himself in front of Montana, into whose face his leveled revolver looked.

"What dockermens?" asked the long-haired sport, with the coolness of a thorough desperado.

"Mine—ther ones yer found in my shanty!"

Montana smiled.

"Ye're jes' a little previous, Merced," he said. "I found nothin' worth takin' in yer cabin. I guess some galoot must hev got ahead ov me."

The answer tore a groan from Merced Monte's throat.

"He beat yer, then!" he said, still eying the rival sport. "Ther Man from Nowhar hez my papers, an' wo ter him for ther theft! You wanted 'em, eh, Montana?"

"Not partic'lar," was the answer. "I hed a

curios'ty ter see 'em, but I'd hev left 'em thar."

"But he didn't—the thief! When he reads 'em he'll throw 'em away. They're worth nothin' in ter Velvet Van. Montana, ye're free. Stand back, boys, an' let him go. I'm judge in this case, an' that's my sentence!"

Montana looked amazed.

"I bev ter let him go," said Merced to himself, "though it would do me good ter send a bullet singin' through his brain. He knows whar Nora is; by watchin' him, she can be found; arter that, I kin hunt him down. That's policy in Satan's Own, arter all."

Seeing that he was actually free, Montana gave the wonder-struck pards a parting look and passed out of the saloon.

"If this camp isn't painted red inside ov forty eight hours, shoot me for a Piute!" he hissed. "I've just left the biggest fool in ther hull Cœur d'Lene region—Merced Monte. I've got yer dockermens, cap'n. Why didn't yer shoot Montana an' search him afterward?"

He laughed derisively as he threw a look at the saloon ere he mounted his horse.

"Ther fools ain't all dead yet!" he exclaimed, and the next moment was riding coolly away.

Merced Monte went back to his shanty and searched the empty log again.

"I'd give ther universe ter hev before me ther man who hez my dockermens!" he cried.

"Why didn't you search him for them when he war hyer?" said a voice that made him turn.

"Search who?" roared Merced, leaping at Owlet whose black eyes were glittering in the doorway. "Tell me who took my dockermens, er by heavens! I'll shake soul an' body loose!"

"Montana!" said Owlet drawing back, but not before Merced's hand had closed on his shoulder.

"Montana?—no!" was the answer.

"Very well. I reckon I hevn't eyes."

"But you hev—ther blackest an' ther meanest in this camp!"

"My eyes saw him. He came alone on his horse with muffled hoofs. He lit yer lamp, reached the shanty an' found the dockermens in the log."

"My God!" cried Merced dropping Owlet. "I hed the devil before my pistol ten minutes ago an' let him go unsearched!"

He looked down the street taken by Montana, and Owlet thought he heard his teeth crack. One liar had taken another at his word.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ROBBED AND CLAWED.

THE boss of Satan's Own seemed thunderstruck when he realized that he had confronted and let get away the man who had stolen the important document hidden in his cabin.

"What puzzles me is that you hevn't seen Velvet Van hyer," he said looking at Owlet.

The little man with the black eyes shook his head.

"I wasn't on the lookout for him," he said. "He might hev come hyer, or Canyon Clara—"

"She will come no more!" interrupted Merced Monte significantly.

"Ar' ye divorced?"

"Yes an' forever, thank Heaven!" was the response. "They play their games nearly out, some people do, an' then their hands ar' trumped an' they lose all. Do I look like a man who'd hev a wife huntin' him long, Owlet?" And Merced showed his teeth in a malevolent grin as he looked down into the little man's face.

"I don't think you do; but I'd advise you to make sart'in ov ther woman."

"Advice not needed!" laughed Merced.

Owlet looked at him a moment longer but said nothing.

He understood that Merced Monte had encountered Canyon Clara and that the woman had got the worst of the meeting.

"She's got as many lives as names," muttered Owlet. "Unless you sent a bullet through her head, Merced, she's liable ter turn up jes' when yer don't want her ter."

Merced walked off with his eyes still glittering from his last words.

"Fool I war ter let Montana go unsearched!" he suddenly exclaimed. "Ther cyclopedia ov Satan's Own furnished his information too late. A thousand dollars ef I hed known that Montana had ther dockermens!"

But it was too late, for at that moment Montana the long-haired was riding away with triumph depicted on his countenance.

"Hold up, Jupiter! I b'lieve I'll look at ther find!" he exclaimed, reining in his steed alongside a mountain wall. "I've been burnin' with curiosity ever since I got my fingers on 'em. Merced showed mercy at ther wrong time. My advice is, when yer hev Montana in a trap, kill 'im!"

The sport drew several matches from his pocket and struck them bunched on the stone, then found a place for them in a convenient crack and drew forth the papers he had abstracted from Merced's cabin.

"I can't wait till I get back ter Nora," he said. "Merced says they wouldn't do Velvet Van any good ef he had 'em. I think Monte doesn't stick ter ther truth thar."

The stolen papers were three in number and had been much folded in order to lie in the little place

in the log, but Montana's bronze hands deftly unfolded them in the light of the matches.

"What's this?" suddenly cried the desperado, catching sight of the writing on the first paper. "I didn't get ther wrong papers, did I? By heavens! I found 'em whar they war hid for a purpose. Merced said they wouldn't do Van any good an' Velvet Van's mission in part is mine. We both want ter clear up ther mystery that hangs about Nugget Nora, an' I hed a right ter think that these papers would solve one ov ther secrets Merced hez kept even from me."

As he read on a look of chagrin and disgust came to his eyes and with an oath he threw the first paper at his feet.

"It warn't worth ther risk!" he cried. "What will ther second paper say?"

Opening it he glanced over its page a moment and then threw it after the other.

The bunch of matches was flickering and Montana had to lean toward the light to inspect the third and last document.

All at once a loud cry parted his lips.

"This is the one, I think!" he cried, and then he read aloud:

"Know the world that my daughter Donna is my only child, and, as such, is my sole heir. I bequeath to her all my property, my ranches, my stock, my California mining interests. I have marked her this day with a mark on the right shoulder which shall be described further along. I have enemies, and they may seek to rob me of my daughter. I bequeath to them—to one Red Andros, in particular—my everlasting hatred. This man has sworn to revenge himself on me in a manner that may affect the fortunes of my daughter. If she should ever disappear, I command my friends to hunt him down. He has been the bane of my life for five years. May Heaven baffle all his schemes, if I cannot. I commit my daughter to the world for protection; for though, in good health now, I believe I have not long to live."

"PHILIP NOLAN."

Montana reached the signature just as the matches went out.

"This is what I call strikin' it rich!" he exclaimed. "Ther papers on ther ground amount ter nothin'—this is ther one I want. A mark on ther right shoulder, eh? I'll investigate when I get back ter ther cavern. I'll bet my neck that I could ride back ter Satan's Own an' put my hands on Red Andros yet ter-night. That's no man in these parts but what has hed more'n one name in his lifetime, an' yo'r no exception ter ther rule, Merced."

"I guess yo'r right thar," said a voice, and Montana turning suddenly saw a figure on the ground and looked down into two sparkling eyes.

"I'm no road-agent, Montana," continued the same voice; "but ef yer please, I'll take ther dockermens in yer hand."

The long-haired sport involuntarily drew back.

"No pistol liftin'!" said the man on the ground. "I've got ther drop on ther citizen from Perdition Flains, an' ther least he troubles me ther better for himself. Hand down ther paper, please. I couldn't find it though I thought I gave ther cabin a thorough search."

"You? war you thar?" cried Montana.

"Yes. I was ahead of you," was the answer. "Thar must hev been a secret spring somewhar."

"You didn't search ther right log," laughed the gold-camp sport. "They say yo'r Rosebud Rhoderick whom we hanged once."

"I'm Velvet Van just now."

"Ther Man from Nowhar?"

"Yes."

"Whar's yer Chinese pard?"

"No matter whar. Come, Montana, I am not hyer ter parley. Hand down ther dockermens!"

Under his black mustache the big sport bit his lip till it bled, and sullenly handed down the paper.

"Thanks," said Velvet Van. "What ar' these dockermens at my feet?"

"Nothin'. One is a map ov some district, an' ther other is pasted over with extracts from Mexican papers."

The man in velvet uttered an exclamation of delight.

"They're worth more ter me than this paper!" he exclaimed, holding the third document up.

"The deuce they ar," cried Montana. "Wal, take 'em an' give me ther one yer hold."

"Not this eve, Montana!" laughed Velvet Van. "Now, will you answer a question?"

"Thet depends," said Montana showing his teeth.

"Whar is Nora?"

The long-haired sport almost laughed outright, showing that Velvet Van had intruded upon a precious secret.

The Man from Nowhar did not press the subject; he only said:

"You played a cool game at Gold Canyon, Montana. My experience has been that a hand like ther one yer held thar nearly always wins. It war well played, anyhow."

The Man from Nowhar stepped back as he finished, and stooping quickly caught up the two papers Montana had cast aside as worthless.

"Turns up when he isn't looked for, doesn't he?" ejaculated the surprised sport alone again.

"Who war lookin' for Velvet Van hyer? Shall

I foller him an' strike for the dockermens? I'll see Nora first. She's got a mark on her shoulder for she told me so at Gold Canyon. She is Philip Nolan's child! Jehu! what a bonanza!"

The handsome figure of Velvet Van had already disappeared, and Montana the robbed rode down the trail again.

He did not look behind him, for he felt assured that he was not followed. He had no documents now.

Some distance from the spot he halted and slid from the saddle, then disappeared in a certain opening at the side of the high-walled and narrow trail.

"I kin play this game out without the papers," he said. "I will see Nora now an' look at thar tattoo on her shoulder, for that's what it is."

The next moment the long-haired sport stood in a dark cavern whose walls and ceiling he could not touch.

"Nora!" he called, in a cautious voice. "Nora, my girl, I am back."

There was no answer excepting the weird echoes of his own voice.

"Heavens! where is the livin' bonanza?" he exclaimed. "Has somebody been hyar an' seized ther prize?"

The next instant he drew a match along the unseen wall and saw it flash in his face.

"To Hades with the man who touches her!" he cried.

The next instant an object leaped toward Montana with a cry more than half-brutish, and the long-haired sport found a claw or something equally as terrible at his wind-pipe, and an animal of some kind at his breast.

"Heavens! what is this?" he roared, as the match went out. "Jupiter! the thing is half human, half wildcat!"

Montana went backward under the incarnate attack of his assailant; he used his bronze hand in vain efforts to wrench it loose; he could not get at his bowie.

Suddenly a sharp pain darted through his lungs. Again and again it was repeated; his throat seemed torn in shreds. No wonder that his brain whirled.

As sudden as the attack was it ended as suddenly. It had not lasted a minute.

When Montana found himself relieved of the incubus he staggered down the corridor leading to the trail outside.

He seemed to know that he was done to the death; that in that terrible minute of attack his career had reached its ending.

The walls guided him, and, staggering along with their aid, he at last reeled out into the early light of dawn.

"That devil had claws an' a knife!" he cried, falling at the feet of the horse which had waited for him. "It was human, after all, an' was Velvet Van's infernal yaller pard! You an' I for it now, Jupiter! I'm not harmless till I'm stiff. Clawed an' knifed, Montana is still a devil from Perdition Flains. Look out when he deals a dyin' blow! Robbed by Velvet Van an' cut by ther Chinaman! Wal, I'll make a hyerafter that'll make Tartarus grin."

Superhuman efforts placed Montana on the horse, but he did not sit upright; he fell across the saddle like an exhausted man.

"Take me somewhar, Jupiter," he gasped. "Take me back ter camp, if nowhar else. I've dropped all ther cards but one, but I'll play it fer all there is in it."

The horse turned about and moved toward Satan's Own in a careful walk.

If Montana had looked back he would have seen a grinning, yellow face among the vines that partly hid the opening of the cavern.

"Montana come, Montana go!" laughed a voice. "Melican man no get the prize Fin Fin holds in his hands. Mebbe Merced comes next, mebbe Van. Alloo samee. Whoever comes will feel Fin Fin's claws an' knife. Me win over 'em all!"

"I will show you!" said a voice behind the yellow pard, and he whirled with a hand at his arm. "You have sent my friend away, probably dead. I warn you now that you shall not carry out your plans. You have pretended to be the friend of those who are my friends, yet you play tiger to the first one that comes. You have turned traitor to some one; you are playing a game of your own. You think me a prize—I'll never be that to you, yellow traitor! I tell you here that at the first opportunity I will throw you to the men you hate. You understand me now, Fin Fin! I am Nugget Nora—the girl with a hidden history. To you I may become Nora the merciless. Beware!"

The eyes of the girl flashed as she spoke, and the yellow imp—he could only look down into them and grin his defiance.

Nora did not quail!

CHAPTER XXVII.

IN MERCED MONTE'S TRAP.

THE day drawing to a close once more, clothed the mountain passes of the Cœur d'Alene country in shadow.

Since early morning Fin Fin the Celestial had not taken his eyes from the lovely young girl

whom he had surprised in the mountains. Her defiant words had caused his watchfulness; he thought that if he removed his eyes from her for a moment she would fly away.

What was going on in the world outside at Satan's Own or among the mountain trails, the Chinaman did not know.

He had been Velvet Van's spy and pard; he had shared some of that cool sport's designs, but now the sight of a girl's face and the presence of Nugget Nora in the cave had sapped his allegiance to the Man from Nowhar.

Did Fin Fin believe that back of the girl's history was a bonanza of untold proportions? Did this almond-eyed heathen think he could grasp it with his yellow fingers by playing traitor to Velvet Van and Canyon Clara?

If he thought so—fool!

However, he watched the girl all day. He was confident that Montana would not come back. After the blows he had dealt with his slender-bladed bowie, the long-haired sport could not be expected to do anybody harm.

As for Velvet Van, he did not know where the cavern was, and the probability was that Merced lived in like ignorance.

Fin Fin had a motive in waiting for darkness. Trails are hard to follow after sundown, and nobody knew this better than the Chinaman.

"'Melican Van no catchee Fin Fin when he once get started. Girl no get away till the big bonanza lies at Fin Fin's feet. Him play loss hand ag'in' all the 'Melican men that wantee girl."

If he watched Nora with a weasel's eyes, she was not unmindful of the espionage.

"Give me half a chance," said the girl to herself more than once during the long day. "Relax your vigilance for a moment, yellow fox, and I'll give you the slip. Montana is not dead. I am certain of it. He was alive when the horse bore him away. He took me from the pards of Gold Canyon, who would have sent me back to Merced Monte. I owe him a great deal for that exploit. He cannot be playing a game against me. Better Montana's friendship than Merced's!"

Night had fairly settled over the world outside, when Fin Fin started at a strange sound, and cast a quick look down the corridor leading to the trail.

Had a hunter come?

"Girl stay there," he said to Nora, ere he departed to investigate the sound, and Nora saw him glide away.

"Now! Heaven has come to my rescue at last!" she exclaimed. "I must get beyond this demon's clutches, and this cavern must not hold me longer."

The corridor was dark, and Fin Fin took no light to show him to the opening. The girl could imagine him creeping down the narrow way over which Montana had staggered a few hours before, in his hand the deadly knife which he knew so well how to use.

In a minute she was after him, stealing on tiptoe along the wall, and holding her breath as she advanced. In a little while the gloom of the corridor had swallowed the pair, and when near the opening the girl hugged the wall and waited.

She had no weapon; the ground was smooth, and yielded nothing with which she could strike a blow for liberty, and a grapple in the dark with the knife-armed Chinaman was not to be thought of.

She heard the vines moved, but saw nothing.

"Something fool Fin Fin," said a voice so near that Nora involuntarily started. "Think go back an' watch 'Melican girl a while longer; then they no catchee."

That was enough. The last words revealed to Nora the fate that was in store for her. Hugging the dark wall she waited for the Chinaman to come back.

Minutes seemed hours, and the excited girl wished that the wall might open and receive her.

At last a sound told her that the Chinese traitor was coming back, but along which wall she did not know."

"Heaven grant that it may not be on my side," cried Nora. "May fate keep him along the other wall."

Step by step came the Celestial toward her station, foot by foot he crept along.

A touch, a breath might destroy her.

Not until a figure had passed in the darkness did Nora the strange girl breathe freely once more. The arm of the almond-eyed man had actually brushed her skirt.

"Now for the starlight!" she inwardly ejaculated, and a moment later she was moving toward the opening while Fin Fin was creeping back to the cavern proper whose interior was revealed by the light by which he had watched his capture since his unexpected success.

Nora held the vines aside until she had stepped forth into the starlight.

The demon in yellow was behind her now, and she resolved that he should stay there.

For one brief moment she stood in front of the cavern, and then sprung away in the direction taken by Montana's horse.

"I will be going toward him anyhow," thought the girl. "I may find him in time to pay him

for his bravery at Gold Canyon. I shall never fall back into the clutches of Fin Fin, the yellow traitor!"

Thus resolved, the escaping girl pushed on. Myriads of stars glowed in the firmament overhead, but the rocks and trees about her threw no shadows.

There was no incentive for her to stop. The bare thought of the man behind her was enough to urge her on and on. It drove her forward anxious and tireless.

She laughed when she thought of the Chinaman's rage on finding the cavern empty and the captive gone. He could not trail her in the uncertain light, but he might run upon her haphazard and win after all.

Nugget Nora found the trail clear, and pushing over it as rapidly as possible placed several miles between her and the cavern in the mountain.

"Stand tergether an' let 'em come!" suddenly said a voice so near that the fleeing girl stopped instantly. "Satan's Own shall swim in blood before they play their hand out."

"Who talks about leavin' ther camp?" was the answer in a voice as rough as the first one. "Count on Crystal Jack an' ther pards left behind. To-morrer we issue ther decree that'll try such men as Dolores Dick. We proclaim Satan's Own under martial law, an' those who want ter turn their backs on her, kin do so then."

Nora fancied that she could see two stalwart figures within a few feet of her halting-place. Without an effort she shrunk back till a barrier checked her.

"What is this?"

The girl looked up and saw the shape of a cabin.

"Merciful heavens! fate has guided me to the gold-camp where Merced Monte is king!" she cried. "I am in the midst of the camp. I have come into a trap where I am no safer than I was in the Chinaman's clutches!"

Crouching at the cabin door, the startled girl attempted to make out the men she had overheard. They were still talking, for she could hear their voices but only now and then was she able to distinguish a word.

"Thar's a main trail ter strike yet, Crystal Jack," suddenly said one in distinct tones. "It's better than fightin' ther ranger Regulators an' Velvet Van."

"Better than findin' yer lost papers, cap'n."

An oath was the first response.

"We find ther dockermens when we find Montana," was the reply. "Ther main trail leads ter ther girl—ther creature Montana fetched up from Gold Canyon. By trailin' him we find her. An' then with Nera an' dockermens I kin shake a fist at fate an' wade ter wealth almost untold."

The girl who heard this could hardly suppress a wild ejaculation.

"Merced Monte?" she muttered. "The man's words betray him. What fortuno brought me into this trap? I have fled from the lake into the sea. My God! is there no escape?"

"To-morrer, cap'n, I go. Ef Crystal Jack can't track Montana down, shoot him for a parson. Issue ther mandate an' execute it with ther boys of anybody refuses ter jine ther new league. I'm goin' with a finger at ther best trigger in Idaho. I'll look out for the Man from Nowhar, an' his yaller pard. Ther woman you say you've settled with?"

"Divorced her forever!" said Merced Monte, fiendishly. "You need not be on the lookout for Canyon Clara. Ther wife I want is worth her weight in diamonds. Ef I could ride, Crystal, I'd go with yer, but my wound weakens me. I'll boss hyer, though, an' if they want ter carry ther war inter Africa while ye'r away, by heavens! they'll find Merced Monte ther liveliest tiger ther ever showed a claw!"

"Keep an open eye, cap'n," said Crystal Jack. "My opinion is that ther hev been a spy in this camp since last spring."

"Name him!"

"I'll do it; thar's no bush thet I'll go behind. By ther Eternal! I'll lay my hand on Owlet's shoulder an' call him a spy any time!"

"Thet man-weasel?" cried Merced Monte.

"No one else! His infernal black eyes arn't in his head for nothin'. He knows all about Velvet Van—can go over ther lists ov Canyon Clara's names—By heavens! he's a spy!"

"Then let us fix him before you go, Crystal," hissed the boss of Satan's Own.

"No; make a special decree for him to-morrow," said the big sport. "Nobody really likes him. Give him so many minutes ter leave camp; if he kicks, you know how ter play with ther trigger, cap'n."

There was no answer that Nora heard, and the two dark forms she had been watching glided away.

"Who is this Owlet they accuse of treachery? Where is he?" she murmured. "If they hate him, he would be my friend."

At that moment the cabin door behind her opened suddenly, and before the astonished girl could spring away a hand fell upon her shoulder and fastened there.

"Not a word!—to cry aloud is peril!" said a voice as she was lifted across the threshold.

The door closed with the last word, and the

breathless Nora found herself still held in pitch darkness."

"In fortune's name, who are you?" she exclaimed. "You cannot be Owlet."

"No; I am Velvet Van from Nowhar. Not a loud word, as I have said. I have been cooped up in this place for hours. It is the cabin of a man who committed suicide a year ago, and by one of the Desperate Dozen's queer decrees, nobody is allowed to enter it. I know who you ar' an' that's enough. Let Crystal Jack ride off on his mission, and Merced Monte play tiger at home; I am goin' ter stay hyer till ther game is played out."

"In Satan's Own?"

"Yes. They'd shoot me on sight, I know, but they may not get the chance. My yellow pard may come—"

"Heavens, no!" interrupted Nora. "I have just escaped from Fin Fin's claws. He has betrayed you, Velvet Van. He is now playing a game of his own."

"Impossible!"

"I will swear it with my hand in yours!"

"What turned him?"

"I am the cause. He sees in me riches. To Fin Fin I am a veritable bonanza."

Velvet Van was silent for a moment.

"Fin Fin turned traitor?" he suddenly said. "I can hardly believe it. I saved that yellow scoundrel's life three times. Well," after a pause, "I may yet have to show him how I can strike."

"He assailed Montana while he guarded me and sent him off nearly dead," said Nora. "But tell me, Velvet Van, who is this Owlet accused of treachery by Crystal Jack?"

"A little man with the keenest eye you ever saw," was the answer.

"They are going to banish him to-morrow."

"So Merced says, but we'll wait till to-morrow comes. I propose ter hev somethin' ter say in ther proceedin's."

"You will not fight Satan's Own?"

"I may," was the response.

"They'll overpower you."

The answer in the darkness was a low, defiant laugh, and Nora felt a hand close upon her wrist while she heard these words:

"I have never been overpowered yet. The decree has gone forth for the doom of the Desperate Dozen!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A TERRIBLE RETURN HOME.

"Now fer my part ov this game. I am ter find Montana, ter track him down an' reach Nugget Nora for Merced's sake. What ef ther girl's beauty should captivate me? What ef Crystal Jack should be smitten by this young Cleopatra ov ther Cœur d'Lene kentry?"

Crystal Jack who was riding leisurely from Satan's Own laughed gayly at the end of his last sentence.

He was big and handsome, though bronzed, and his long black mustache the wind blew back to his ears.

"Merced had better send another man," the sport went on. "I'm liable ter go off ther handle at sight ov ther girl ef she is ther beauty they crack her up ter be. But I owe Merced allegiance. He expects duty, not treachery from you, Crystal Jack. Do ther former an' throw ther latter headlong inter Tartarus!"

To find Montana was the sport's mission, and after that to find, through him, the whereabouts of Nugget Nora at that moment in Satan's Own with the Man from Nowhar.

Armed to the teeth and fitted for an encounter with any foe, Crystal Jack rode along the trail.

Merced Monte's best man was no coward, and if the boss of Satan's Own should fall he could step into his boots, and lead the remnant of the Desperate Dozen with the same coolness Merced displayed.

Merced Monte's final instructions to his messenger and spy took Crystal Jack to a certain point where he was to draw rein and wait for daylight. It was near the spot where Montana had overtaken Merced when on the way to Gold Canyon, and there Crystal Jack stopped and waited.

During the silent and dark hours between midnight and dawn, the desperado and his horse became statues in the pass hugging the wall on the right, but wide awake and on the alert.

"All that comes ter my net won't be fish, mebbe," muttered Jack; "but Montana will prove a whale ef he comes. Ten years ov service with Merced ought ter make me reliable, but as I've remarked afore thar's no tellin' what a face might do."

And so through the night missing no sound, but seeing nothing, the right bower of Satan's Own sat in the saddle in the mountain trail.

"Mornin'!" he ejaculated at last. "Suthin's goin' ter come—I feel it in my bones."

Something did come!

All at once the neigh of a horse startled the mountain echoes, and Crystal Jack gazed down the trail to see a single steed advancing slowly toward him.

"Jehu! what's thet hangin' from ther stir-

rup!" suddenly cried Merced's man. "Livin' men don't ride that way in this region."

The horse came on watched carefully by the big sport, and when he got near enough Crystal Jack leaned forward and clutched the bridle-rein.

"Hold' up hyer an' let me see who ye've got that," said Jack glancing down at the body being dragged from the stirrup.

The next moment the sport slid to the ground and bent over the man.

"God above! it's Montana!" he exclaimed. "In ther name ov heaven, old pard, what put yer in this condition? Dead ar' yer? I'll never find ther girl by watchin' yer, but I kin do one thing. I kin take yer back ter camp."

It was evident that the horse had dragged the long-haired sport a long distance over the rough trails of the gold hills.

The ankle in the stirrup was swelled to twice its natural size, the garments had been torn by the sharp stones of the trails, and the once beautiful hair was matted and full of burrs. It was no longer Montana the handsome, but Montana the repulsive.

Crystal Jack shuddered while he looked. He could not but think that he had followed this man in more than one desperate enterprise, that he had seen him, single-handed, meet odds which would make the most daring quail, and that he had taken an oath to stand by him while the League of the Desperate dozen had an existence.

The big sport bent over the trail and gazed down in the gold sport's face.

Suddenly the swollen lips fell apart, and a groan that startled Crystal Jack was distinctly heard.

"By heavens! he isn't dead," cried Jack, returning to Montana. "Soo hyer, cap'n, Crystal Jack stands by yer—yer old pard ov ther Llamo an' ther Rockies!"

Montana opened his eyes and fixed them on the face pressed close to his. Jack's hand flew to his pulse.

"On ther borders ov ther grand divide!" he said. "I've found him in time, perhaps. Montana, ye hevn't got but a few minutes this side ov ther grave."

"Make—it—hours," was the slowly spoken response.

"I wish I could, but by George! cap'n, ther hand ov death hez trumped yer life ace. Who did it?"

"A human wildcat, with claws an' a bowie."

"But his name?"

"They call him Fin Fin."

"Ther yaller pard is a caution."

Montana shut his eyes and groaned.

"Ye'r' not goin' ter die hyar an' let ther girl ye took from Gold Canyon shift for herself, ar' ye, Montana?" asked Jack.

Merced Monte's man bent down to catch the reply.

"I didn't take 'er away," Montana said. "She isn't in my hands now."

"Not now, mebbe; I kin see that myself. So yer don't know whar Nora is?"

"No."

"Ye'r' dyin' cap'n."

"I know it. God knows how long I've been dragged from the stirrup. Whar's ther camp?"

A strange gleam lit up Crystal Jack's eyes.

"What he won't tell hyar, by ther nine gods! he will thar!" he said to himself, and then looking into the long-haired sport's face he continued aloud: "I'll show ye ther camp, cap'n."

"Yes: take me thar."

Crystal Jack sprung at once to the task before him. He raised the sport and with some assistance from him, placed him on his horse, but not upright in the saddle.

"Tie me down. I might fall off," said Montana.

It was done, and the once handsome sport buried his hands in the steed's mane while Crystal Jack with his left hand at the rein, led him slowly away. What possessed the dying man to go back to Satan's Own where he was almost certain to meet the pard who was now against him?

Crystal Jack looked at his companion many times during the journey.

"I oughtn't take him thar, but he will go," he muttered. "Ther boys loved him once but they're all with Merced now. Confound it! ef his condition doesn't almost turn me back ter ther old sport!"

Through the first dawnings of morning, Crystal Jack led Montana's horse over the Satan's Own trail.

The man lashed to the saddle did not speak. He seemed to have fallen into a stupor, for when Crystal Jack spoke several times, he made no reply. Fin Fin's nails and knife had done the work.

The first beams of the sun were lighting up the earth when the two horses reached the gold-camp.

Crystal Jack leaned toward his companion and cried:

"Satan's Own, cap'n! Wake up an' look at ther old camp."

The name appeared magical in its effects.

A quiver passed over Montana's frame, and the drooping head was raised.

"Ther camp, eh?" he said slowly, and hardly above a whisper.

"Ther old rendyvoo," was the answer. "Many's ther time we've had hyer, but I guess they're played out."

The semblance of a smile appeared at Montana's mouth.

"Take me ter my shanty," he said.

But Crystal Jack rode past the sport's cabin and drew rein in front of Wisdom Bill's trap where a group of seven or eight men awaited him with curiosity written on their dark faces.

"In fate's name, who's that ye've picked up?" cried the sports.

"A man you've once respected," was the answer. "Whar's Merced?"

"At home."

"Bring him hyer."

One of the men started off, and Crystal Jack threw a look at the deserted whisky-den.

"Anythin' left in thar?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Bring me ther hottest stuff behind ther bar. I want ter throw life back inter this man."

"But who is he?"

"Montana."

"Thet piece ov bruised humanity ar' not Montana! What ar' ye givin' us, Crystal?"

"Let me wake 'im up an' show yer," said Jack. "Now watch ther effect ov this p'isen."

He reached for the bottle a man had just brought from the saloon, and throwing back Montana's head, held it to his lips.

In an instant the fiery brandy seemed to throw new life into the frame of the long-haired sport.

"What d'ye say now?" exclaimed Jack, elated over his success, while he looked down upon the crowd. "Ther old look comes back inter his eyes, eh? Who says now that I hevn't picked up Montana from Perdition Plains?"

There was no doubt of it now, and the men gathered around the horse clamorous to know the cause of his terrible condition.

"Wait till Merced comes," answered Jack.

"Wal, hyer he is."

The next moment the stalwart figure of Merced Monte appeared at Crystal Jack's knee, and the eyes of the two men met.

"I found 'im sooner than I expected," said Jack. "But who thought I'd find him in a fix like this?"

The gaze of Merced flew quickly to the man Crystal Jack had fetched home.

The work of the stimulant was still apparent; it seemed to have given Montana, the long-haired, a new lease of life.

"Take 'im inter ther saloon," said Merced suddenly. "I hev some bizness with 'im."

The tone in which these words were uttered made the band exchange glances.

Crystal Jack leaped to the ground, and in an instant had cut Montana loose. A dozen hands went up to catch him as he tottered in the saddle, and he was carried into the saloon and laid on a blanket which had been thrown upon the floor for his reception.

"See hyer! this isn't ther old shanty!" said Montana. "It'll be a bad day for you all of I ain't taken home!"

Merced Monte caught the eyes that were fixed upon him, and in more than one he saw sympathy for the dying pard.

"He shall go ter ther cabin d'rectly," he said to the men. "I have bizness with him first an' alone. I'll call yer back in five minutes."

The men passed out and Crystal Jack the last one shut the door and stationed himself outside.

"Montana, I want my dockermens!" cried Merced, pouncing upon the prostrate man with the suddenness of an eagle. "I let yer go off when I hed yer without s'archin' yer. Fate hez brought yer back. Now I'll take my papers."

He tore open the long-haired sport's shirt front as he finished, and his hand disappeared beneath the dust-stained garment.

"Nothin' fer yer pains, eh, Merced?" said Montana, when Merced Monte had let slip an oath of disappointment.

"Whar ar' they?—you know."

"Ther robber war robbed," was the answer.

"No."

"I looked down inter Velvet Van's revolver an' delivered up ther papers."

Merced Monte sprung to his feet with a wild ejaculation.

"I thought yer said them dockermens wouldn't do him any good," said Montana following him with his eyes.

"But he might find ther key," was the answer. "You took 'em an' then gave 'em up? You ar' playin' for Nora too, eh?"

"Not very much just now, Merced."

"She's in yer clutches!—you took 'er from ther pards ov Gold Canyon. You've hid her somewhar in ther mountains. Tell me! er by ther blazes ov perdition, Montana, I'll send yer soul ter yer master."

The swoop of a bronze hand followed the utterance of the threat. It alighted on the throat of the dying sport and seemed to close there.

"Whar is ther Queen ov Dirkton?" cried Merced. "I'm shot, like yerself, Montana, but I am not so close ter ther divide. Whar is ther girl? Quick! out with ther secret."

The eyes of Montana seemed to laugh defiance at the maddened sport and one of his hands closed but feebly on Merced's wrist.

The next second the door was thrown open, and Crystal Jack sprung across the threshold.

"Hyer's yer mountain pink, Merced!" cried Jack.

Monte looked once at the big sport and then sprung up.

Crystal Jack stood before him holding Nugget Nora by the wrist!

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE QUEEN OF DIRKTOWN

A SPIRIT alighting at his feet from the unseen land would not have surprised Merced Monte more than did the unexpected appearance of the Queen of Dirkton.

He started forward with his eyes riveted upon the girl.

"Don't touch me now. I came here to see the man on the floor," cried Nora, waving the desperado off.

"Montana?"

"Yes."

"You've not tied yer fortunes ter him, girl!" cried Merced, thoroughly astonished.

There was no answer, while the young girl walked forward, and bent over the long-haired sport.

Merced Monte stepped toward her, but her black eyes caught the movement, and she whirled suddenly upon him.

"I am here to see Montana, not you!" she said, facing the boss of the gold-camp. "Merced Monte, I owe you nothing for the past. This man here may be dying."

"He is, by Jupiter!" grated the man held aloof by Nora's eye.

She turned to Montana again, and her lips almost touched his bruised face as she whispered:

"It is I—Nugget Nora. Oh! do you not know me, Montana?"

A look of recognition already filled the big sport's eyes.

"I know yer, girl. You've given ther heathen ther slip!"

"Yes."

"I'm glad ov that. I'd give my chances for life fer a hand at his weazen. Ye'r' in bad company hyer—in Merced Monte's trap!"

"I know that."

"An' yet you've come hyer ter see me!"

"Yes—to thank you for delivering me from the hands of the men of Dirkton, now the pards of Gold Canyon."

"Pshaw! you shouldn't hev run ther risk for that. I didn't do yer much ov a favor."

"I owe you thanks for it. I am not friendless in this camp."

"Who's with yer?"

"A cool head who will not blunder. But, Montana, I want to ask you: Do you know my history?"

A smile appeared at the long-haired sport's lips. He caught Nora's eyes before he spoke.

"This isn't ther place ter tell it ef I did," he said.

"But you're cut to the death."

"Who says so? I've been dragged at a stirrup afore. I've had a knife in my bosom an' human claws whar ther heathen put his'n. Dead? not yet—only in ther shudder, Nora."

"I guess that's enough," said the voice of Merced Monte, who, standing by Crystal Jack, had watched Nora and Montana.

"Very well. You command here," said the girl, rising. "This is Satan's Own, and I see it by daylight for the first time. That man there took me from the pards of Gold Canyon, once your tools of Dirkton, Merced Monte. I claim a right to remain with him for that deed. Darel you have him carried to his cabin, and leave him there in my care?"

The boss desperado looked thunderstruck.

"If you don't take the red card, shoot me for a gopher!" he laughed. "I hev other use for you than ther work you want ter do. No; if we carry Montana ter his cabin, we'll git a nurse ter suit us. Call ther boys in—enough ter carry ther blanket."

Crystal Jack was at the door in an instant, and four men filed into the saloon. Merced Monte met them half-way.

"Boys," he said to the group, in a whisper, "between Merced and Montana, who are you for?"

"For Merced!" was the reply.

"Then carry him ter his cabin. Tell Dolores Dick ter dress his wounds, but watch ther doctor like a hawk."

The four took up the strong blanket on which Montana lay, and lifting man and all, moved toward the door.

Nugget Nora followed them.

"You will stay," said Merced, touching her arm. "You can't do a dyin' g'loot like that any good. Montana's about ter cross ther divide."

"I go with him!" she said, breaking from his touch and giving him a look that almost made him recoil. "You must remember, Merced Monte, that I am not to be won with threats!"

"What's ter be done?" said the sport, turning upon Crystal Jack, whose eyes were fastened on Nora as he walked from the saloon after the

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blanket. "She has come ter Satan's Own ter be near Montana. What kind ov turn has ther game taken, anyhow?"

"One that don't exactly suit yer, cap'n," was the answer, and Crystal Jack showed Merced a grinning face.

"I'll turn it ter suit myself!" was the flashed retort. "Ef I don't play out a bold hand befor ter-morrer mornin', license me for a priest! Ther way ter break ther tie between ther girl an' Montana is ter see that he crosses ther divide. Who war lookin' for her hyer? Whar did she come from? You war outside."

"Hang me ef I know. I didn't know she war about till somebody behind me said suthin', an' when I turned, that she war—about ter go in ter Montana."

Merced looked perplexed; then suddenly he said:

"You're with me, Jack!"

"Ye're my cap'n."

"Confound it! let her go with him ter his shanty. Dolores Dick shall do him no good. I'll see ter that. We'll issue ther decree this mornin'. All who don't walk up an' swear allegiance to ther Dozen, kin walk. Dolores will never swear. I know him well. What he knows ov surgery may patch Montana up for a little while, an' when he leaves, the man dies."

"Yes," said Crystal Jack mechanically.

"When he dies ther girl remains," Merced went on. "Now that I've got her hyer, she shall never become bird in the bush ag'in. Montana hedn't my papers. Ther Man from No-where robbed him."

"Thief robbed thief, eh?" laughed Jack, while Merced did not smile.

"Yes, curse Velvet Van!" he hissed.

"You watch ther shanty for me. Dolores Dick knows how ter fix up a dyin' man right well. I wish ter heaven Montana had been knifed ter ther heart an' finished."

"Thet wouldn't hev brought Nora hyer."

"True, Crystal. I'm glad you found him. She must have followed yer. Well, ef Satan's Own can't beat a girl an' a dyin' man we'll walk to Hades. (Go an' keep an' eye on 'em!)"

Crystal Jack walked out, and Merced Monte turned to a bottle that stood on the counter.

"I'm on top yet," he said. "Ef I hev lost my dockments, I've got ther prize back—I kin lay my fingers on ther livin' bonanza. I hev no wife ter stand between me an' fortune now. I may fail ter deprive a man ov life when I haul him up at ther end ov a lasso, but when I get my hands at a woman's throat, I never fail—never. Help yerself, Merced."

He accepted his own invitation to drink from the black bottle with a good deal of gusto, and down went a full glass of its peppery contents.

"Now, sir, I'll remain cock ov ther walk ther rest ov ther time," he ejaculated. "Nora's comin' ter Satan's Own hez strengthened me twenty-fold. I wish ther yaller heathen would come. I wish Velvet Van would show up. Gods! I want ter get this game off my hands!"

He walked out and straight to his own cabin, from which he had been called to meet Montana.

The eyes of a dozen men followed him, and a few big, gray-shirted fellows standing together began to whisper.

"Boys, it's choice between ther two captains," said one. "They're both hyer—Merced an' Montana. They ar' enemies ter ther death, an' one I fear hezn't long ter live. We hev foller'd 'em both through thick an' thin. My mind is made up. I've chosen between ther two. Future events may show whar Brazos Bent stands."

"Who's yer choice?" asked one of the listeners.

"It's not ter be given away, eh?"

"Never."

"I'm for Montana."

"So am I," was the answer and the other two responded, "So ar' we!"

Merced Monte did not hear this. He had reached his cabin, and stood in the middle of the floor with the fire of triumph in his eyes.

"Ter be safe I'd better write out ther decree," he said. "Thar may be a few kickers, but they won't fight. This town were founded by ther Dozen an' we only took Dolores Dick an' his friends in for company."

Upon a shelf near the caves he found some paper under a board and a short search revealed rude writing materials. Merced Monte was no ready writer, and the letters he made were bold ones like his character.

For some minutes he worked zealously at the paper before him, and when he had reached the bottom he leaned back and looked at the following manifesto.

PROCLAMATION.

"We, the Desp'rit Dozen ov Satan's Own, hereby warn all citizens ov this camp ter leave before ten o'clock this day unless they swear to stan' with us in defense ov our right ag'in' any persons who come ter grapple us. We hev enemies; we founded this camp an' we mean ter hold it. The oath taken binds a man to the Desp'rit Dozen—to their laws an' commands. After ten o'clock all persons in camp who hev not taken the oath will be treated accordin' ter ther laws ov the Dozen. Let all be warned. This proclamation means bizness. The time has come for it."

"Ordered by the Desp'rit Dozen, an' issued from head-quarters."

MERCED MONTE,

"Captain, D. D."

"Thar's no foolin' about that manifesto," said Merced when he reached the end of his writing. "A writin' machine would get it up in better shape, but it'll not hev ter be explained."

He put up the writing materials and went out.

At the door he encountered Crystal Jack who glanced at the manifesto and then said in a low voice:

"Don't post that paper now, cap'n."

"Why not?" flashed Merced.

"It won't do. The boys ar' divided, an', besides, we've got a strange tiger in camp."

Merced Monte gave his right bower a penetrating look.

"What's turned the boys?" he cried. "Give me ther names ov ther traitors!"

"I can't. I'm on ther scent only. Some talk ov standin' by Montana."

"Members ov ther Dozen?"

"Yes."

"Ther league will sting itself ter death yet. What d'ye propose?"

"Wait till night. The strange tiger can't get away; I've fixed that already."

"Whar is he?"

"Pardon me, cap'n, but I can't speak now. Trust Crystal Jack. Let him keep his secret till sundown."

"Then you'll let it out, eh?"

"Yes."

"I'll wait, but I'll come ter yer fer ther secret then."

"You shall hev it, Merced," and Crystal Jack walked away.

CHAPTER XXX.

REMEMBER SHASTA.

"WAL, what's ther chances? Hev I got one in a thousand, Dolores?"

These two inquiries came from a man who lay on some blankets in a cabin in Satan's Own, and he looked while he spoke into the face of a man who had just examined his various hurts.

Near by stood a beautiful young girl who gazed anxiously into the face of Dolores.

"I want no foolin'," continued the prostrate desperado. "Ef Montana's ter cross ther great divide soon, he wants ter know it. I know that the heathen used knife an' claw with terrible effect, though it didn't last a minute. Blurt out ther truth, Dolores; I'm no woman. This isn't ther first time I've looked inter death's face. Hev I one chance in a thousand?"

"Hardly," said Dolores Dick, the citizen of Satan's Own who knew something about surgery.

"Which means nary a chance," Montana replied. "Will I take a squint at to-morrer?"

"Perhaps."

"All right. You'll come and see me again, Dolores?"

"Yes."

The long-haired sport and Nora were alone, but not unwatched.

Among the rough rafters of the cabin gleamed a pair of eyes that had watched the examination and the subsequent proceedings.

The reader has not forgotten that Owlet had taken possession of Montana's cabin during the desperado's absence. He was there still, and the bringing of the wounded sport home had barely given him time to escape to the rafters overhead.

"Now tell me how you came hyer," said the wounded rough to Nora. "You didn't foller Crystal Jack an' I ter camp?"

"No. I was here when you came."

"Alone?"

"No. You will not give it away, Montana."

"I give nothin' away."

"I am here with your enemy. Velvet Van has been in camp some time."

An exclamation of surprise parted Montana's lips.

"He must be well disguised," he said.

"He is not disguised at all. You would recognize him on sight."

"In heaven's name where does he hide?"

"His quarters are the cabin inhabited by the man who killed himself last year."

"Jupiter! a better place he couldn't hev selected. Why didn't you stay with him?"

The girl looked down into the sport's eyes before she answered.

"You war safe with him. Now Merced has you in his trap," Montana went on.

"I'll risk his work to be permitted to nurse the man who took me from the bondage of the pards of Gold Canyon," she said.

"Why, confound it, girl, you war gittin' inter ther clutches of Merced Monte's pard when you escaped from them."

"I know it, but Montana is not Merced."

"You don't know—you hevn't tried him," said the wounded desperado, smiling. "We're all playin' for ther same stake, Nora—gold. Hev you never thought that you might be a livin' bonanza—that you war a stolen heir ov a big estate?"

"I must have a history of some kind. There is a strange tattoo on my shoulder and the woman who came to Dirktonce once and looked at it went away saying that I was the right person."

"That woman must have been Canyon Clara, whom I know best as Crimson Crissie."

"Who is she?" asked the girl, eagerly.

"A woman I warn you ter beware of. I can say no more. Ef we had Owlet hyer, an' could get him ter tell all he knows, you'd vow never ter make that mountain angel yer friend. He says that she is Velvet Van's sister, but that is whar Owlet has fooled himself. You must not remain hyer. When night comes you must go."

"I will not!" spoke the young girl firmly. "I have told Merced Monte that he can play his game out without gainin' me. He can't make me his wife."

"You don't know what he can't do backed up by ther Desperate Dozen!" exclaimed Montana. "If I could see 'em singly that'd be a change ov opinion in Satan's Own afore dark. Ef I could get a piece ov paper inter Crystal Jack's hands I'd bring Merced's right bower over ter my side."

"Do you think so?" cried the girl eagerly. "I do."

"I'll carry the message."

"You?" ejaculated Montana looking with astonishment into the young girl's face. "Step out of this shanty an' find yerself in Merced's hands. No, I don't send you inter ther trap. No, no, my mountain jewel."

Nugget Nora pleaded with the sport, but found him inexorable.

He would intrust no message to her.

"By heavens! I'll die hyer an' make no sign afore I send you out among ther wolves," he would say. "You'll get that soon enough, mabbe. Hang me! ef I hasten ther hour. We'll wait till Dolores comes."

But the hours passed bringing no Dolores to the cabin. The mountain surgeon seemed to have forgotten his patient, who still lived despite the terrible wounds which were slowly but surely finishing his career.

"What could you say to Crystal Jack to draw him from Merced?" asked Nora, when the afternoon was half spent.

"It would only be two words, but they'd convey a world ov meanin'," was the answer. "Ef I could get a paper ter Crystal it would read 'Remember Shasta!—nothin' more. Arter readin' that, he couldn't decide for Merced as between he an' I. 'Remember Shasta!' Them words'd send ther blood b'ilin' through his veins. By Jehosaphat! Merced would lose his right bower, an' you'd get a friend who'd stand between you an' all ther revolvers in Satan's Own. Wait till Dolores comes."

Full of anxiety, Nugget Nora waited, while the day crept away and the descending sun cast lengthy shadows across the mountain trails.

"Remember Shasta," she repeated over and over as she glanced at the bronzed desperado sleeping soundly on his blankets with two serpent eyes watching them from overhead. "If Dolores refuses to bear the message I'll do it myself. Crystal Jack shall hear those words if it costs me life itself. I could turn the world against you, Merced Monte. I owe you eternal hatred, tiger."

On the outside unperceived by the girl, who appeared frequently at Montana's little window, keen eyes watched the cabin.

A number of men who sauntered leisurely about saw it all the time, but one man in particular never took his eyes from it.

"When ther sun sets I will ask Crystal Jack for ther secret that he's been keepin' all day," said this person. "What kind ov a strange tiger has he found in camp? Ther yaller heathen hezn't come back. Velvet Van isn't hyer, an' I know that I'm divorced forever from Canyon Clara. I wish it war night now. I've withheld ther manifesto at Jack's request. He must be watchin' ther pards he says hev turned over ter Montana. They'll drop in their boots when he has named 'em. I kin trust Crystal. Nothin' kin throw my right bower over ter Montana's side."

Thus spoke Merced Monte who all that day had watched Montana's cabin from his own.

Near him stood a table on which side by side lay two heavy revolvers and another rested at his hip.

He saw the sun creep westward over the wooded slopes of the gold hills. The day had never waned so slowly before.

"The sun is down!" he exclaimed at last. "Whar is ther pard with ther secret? He war ter hev come hyer. Must I hunt him up?"

But he waited awhile longer or until the whole camp was in shadow and then stole from the cabin.

The time had come for the divulging of the secret about the strange tiger in camp, and Crystal Jack was the man now eagerly sought by Merced Monte.

"I'll post ther decree ter-night," he said. "I'll change it first ter read that ther oath ov allegiance ter ther Dozen shall be taken afore daylight. Satan's Own shall know that ther man who rules hyer is Monte from Merced. Hallo! Dolores."

Merced had come suddenly upon a man who was walking toward Montana's quarters and his hand fell upon his arm as he went on.

"How's yer patient?"

"I war just goin' ter see."

"What ar' ther chances?" asked Merced in a voice that betrayed his eagerness.

"One in a thousand, mebbe," said Dolores Dick.

"Has he really that chance?"

"I can't say."

"By heavens! I'll hate forever ther doctor that fetches him through," cried Merced looking into Dick's eyes. "You understand that, sir. I never speak in parables."

It was look for look.

"Neither do I," was the cool and steady answer. "I will bring him through if I can."

"It'll be at yer risk! Remember!"

"At my risk it shall be," was the retort.

"You'll hev Merced an' ther Dozen at yer back."

Dolores Dick laughed till Merced grew black in the face.

"Go!" he said, dropping the mountain surgeon's arm. "You befriended Velvet Van ther first time he came ter camp. We overlooked that. Bring Montana through an' face ther consequences."

Dolores Dick started off with a final look which only increased Merced Monte's rage as he glared after him.

"Whar is Crystal?" he cried, turning away. "Mebbe Dolores is ther strange tiger he hez discovered. Ef he is, by Jupiter! he'll be an easy beast ter tackle!"

"What's that, cap'n?"

Merced Monte turned half-way around and found himself face to face with the very man for whom he had been looking—Crystal Jack.

"Is that yer tiger, Jack?" he said, pointing at Dolores Dick whose figure had almost disappeared.

"If that's ther yaller skin that hez invaded Satan's Own, we'll soon hang it up ter dry."

"That's not my tiger," laughed Jack. "Ah! the sun is down, Merced."

"An' I want ther secret. First about ther pards who favor Montana, next about ther stranger in ther camp. Out with it, Crystal."

Without replying Crystal Jack put his arm within one of Merced Monte's and led him away.

"What ef I war ter tell yer, cap'n, that ther suicide's shanty war inhabited?" he said, watching Merced's countenance while he spoke.

"By a ghost?" was the quick response. "No! you needn't tell this wild pink, Jack, that Buckshot's spirit is visitin' ther old cabin, for he won't take it in. Is this ther secret? Hev I waited all day ter listen to a fool ghost story?"

The two desperadoes had reached a spot opposite the suicide's cabin and were only a few feet from the door.

"I see no ghost!" laughed Merced Monte, facing the rough structure about which hung a strange silence. "Inhabited, Crystal Jack? I guess not. Thar's no man fool enough ter take up his abode thar. I'll show yer by openin' ther door."

Merced Monte started forward with the last word, but the hand of Crystal Jack caught his arm and drew him back.

"You wouldn't git to ther door alive!" whispered Jack, at his ear. "Come with me till I give yer ther racket."

"Give it ter me hyer!" cried Merced, never budging a step. "Tell me who's beyond that door, an' I'll open it ef it be Satan himself."

The boss of Satan's Own had planted himself firmly on the spot, and each hand clutched a cocked revolver.

"Tell me, or by ther eternal! I'll find out for myself!" he went on, glancing at Crystal Jack. "Man, ghost or devil, we'll face ther tenant ov Buckshot's shanty."

"You won't believe me if I tell you," said Jack. "The tigerin' thar is called Velvet Van!"

Merced gave his right bower a look full of disbelief.

"By George! ye 'r' right!" he cried. "I don't swallow no such stuff ez that. Velvet Van in thar? Tell me that Buckshot hez come back. Come, Crystal, well go an' sample some ov Wisdom Bill's deserted pisen. Then I'll listen ter ther traitors' names."

Crystal Jack stared in amazement at the boss of Satan's Own. Was he mad?

"I don't want any nonsense. You can't make me believe that ther Man from Nowhar hez spent twelve hours in Satan's Own unmolested. You wouldn't stan' that, Crystal. Ef you insist that he hez after we've drank, I'll come back hyer an' open that door!"

Crystal Jack made no reply and Merced led him away.

The deserted saloon was but a few steps distant, but ere it was reached Jack felt something slipped into his hand, but saw no one.

Once across the threshold, Merced lit the lamp that hung over the end of the counter, and Crystal Jack glanced at the contents of the paper his fingers closed on.

They consisted of but these words:

"Remember Shasta—Montana!"

"Great God!" cried Jack. "This makes a traitor out o' me!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

MERCED MONTE'S SHOT.

MARCHING almost silently down a mountain trail walled in by walls of somber gray stone, twenty men who looked like desperadoes!

There was something ominous about their voiceless tramp, and the fact that their faces were turned toward Satan's Own indicated that they meant red mischief there.

They looked like the men who had quietly surrounded Wisdom Bill's saloon a few nights before, putting an end to two members of the Desperate Dozen.

Had the Ranger-Regulators come back at the call of Velvet Van? Was the whole game to be finished by one grand coup, and the dozen, as a league, wiped from the face of the earth?

If the twenty had horses they did not show them. There was danger of the steeds neighing; the stern men could control themselves.

Like a cloud surcharged with doom, and without a sound, the band descended upon the gold-camp.

At the edge of it, the leader, a six-foot man in buckskin, threw up his hand and all behind him stood still.

"Wait for me hyer," he said, and immediately disappeared.

Moving down the deserted street in the starlight, nothing escaped his vigilant eyes.

He resembled for all the world a dozen inhabitants of Satan's Own, for men in the gold-camps are wonderfully alike. Gliding from cabin to cabin, he went through the camp, and on his way back stopped near the open door of the saloon and saw two men in the light of its lonely lamp.

Merced Monte and Crystal Jack did not see this stalwart spy.

"I've caught two ov ther daisies with their heads together," he muttered, and so he had.

Crystal Jack still held crumpled in his hand the paper he had received in a mysterious manner from some one.

The startling effects of the three words he had tried to conceal from Merced, who was asking him to name the men who had declared for the long-haired sport.

"It would be goin' back on old pards," said Jack. "Excuse me, cap'n."

"It is desertin' me," was the answer. "Remember the oath taken among ther basaltic buttes. Thar ar' traitors in camp. Montana tried ter kill Merced, yer captain. Thet hez outlawed him, that has condemned him ter death."

"He's dyin' now, they say."

"But Dolores says he will bring him through," said Merced, quickly. "Crystal Jack, hev you turned on me also?"

Crystal Jack's eyes appeared to flash.

"Who accuses me?" he exclaimed.

"He who is not for me is against me," Merced answered, laying his hand on Jack's shoulder.

Jack shook it off with a shrug, and his hand tightened on the paper he held.

"All right!" suddenly cried the boss of Satan's Own. "I've played dead hands in a worse fix than this. Hang me! ef I don't post ther decree now. Thar ar' some who will not flinch. We'll know inside ov ten minutes who inhabits Buckshot's cabin—whether ghost, man or devil."

"It's all for a girl, cap'n, after all," observed Jack.

"Au' that girl shall be Merced Monte's wife!" thundered the desperado. "Yes, this whole game hez been played for a girl—a mountain flower that a wind blew inter camp awhile ago. She's belonged ter me from a babe, an' woe ter ther man er men who get between me an' Nugget Nora! Doctor Dolores may say that he will bring Montana through, but Merced says 'No!' Velvet Van an' ther yaller devil may play their best hands, but I walk to ther end ov ther game, an' throw down ther deal that wins it all. Look me in ther eye, Crystal Jack. Pards we've been an' pards we ar'. Think ov ther camps on ther Llano, ther fights in ther shadow ov Shasta—"

"Thar!" interrupted Crystal Jack and bending toward Merced he continued: "I've thought through ther hull catalogue. Circumstances force me on ther other side, cap'n. I'm sorry ter say it, devilish sorry; but I've been reminded."

"Reminded ov what?—how?" cried Merced.

"No difference," said Jack coolly, as he shook his head. "Count me on Montana's side in this fight for ther girl."

This firm avowal drove Merced Monte back a step.

"Post your decree, but carry it out if you kin," continued Crystal Jack. "You may hev more than half ther camp ag'in' yer. Ther Dozen is doomed, cap'n."

"An' you hev turned traitor at ther supreme moment?"

Crystal Jack saw the movement that accompanied the sentence. He saw Merced Monte's bronzed hand alight upon the butt of his revolver, but quick as a flash his fingers encircled the wrist.

"You don't want ter try ther drop game on Crystal Jack!" he said with a cool, tantalizing laugh. "It would never make yer Nora's husband man, if you draw that six shooter on me. I'll send yer soul ahead ov Montana's ter perdition! A word ter ther wise is sufficient hyer as elsewhere."

Crystal Jack removed his hand and straightened again. His eye had a look which told Merced that his right bower was a dangerous person to play with.

"Now, go an' post yer notice," continued Jack. "I'll be mistaken ef anybody obeys it. Remember that Crystal Jack hez declared for Montana, but ther man in Buckshot's shanty I'll kill on sight. Side by side we'll storm that fort, Merced, but Dolores shall fetch ther long-haired sport through ef he kin."

The speaker stepped toward the open door, his eyes watching closely the man he addressed.

Merced Monte stood up like a baffled man. The events of the last few moments seemed to have been too much for him. He saw Crystal Jack walk calmly across the threshold, and out into the night.

"If I crush this new conspiracy, that's nothin' but a dyin' man between me an' success!" he suddenly cried. "Ther girl hez infatuated Crystal Jack. She's worse nor a Cleopatra—she charms all who see her."

His revolver seemed to leap from his belt at the touch of his hand, and the next moment he stood at the door himself.

Suddenly he caught the movement of a human figure a few yards away.

"Send me ter Hades without boots, ef I don't begin now!" sprung from his tongue, and the next instant the sharp report of a revolver rung through the camp.

Forty feet from Merced Monte a man leaped up from the ground, and pitched forward with a short cry.

"One!" muttered the boss of Satan's Own. "I go forward without a halt to ther end. I hated ter drop Crystal Jack in that manner, but that's no help for it. Now I'll show myself at Montana's shanty before ther traitors kin act, an' keep Doctor Dolores from pullin' him through."

Merced Monte could see the figure lying on the ground where his victim had struck, and he was about to turn away when a footstep startled him, and a moment later he looked down into the face of one of the twelve pards.

"Did yer shoot, cap'n?"

"Yes, Alf, but first, who hev you declared for—Merced or Montana?"

"For Merced until death!"

"Then go an' look at my target lyin' out thar," said the mad sport. "I hed ter do it, Alf. Crystal Jack war ther last man I ever thought would turn ag'in' me."

The pard called Alf sprung toward the man lying on the ground and bent over him.

"Jupiter an' Juno!" he suddenly exclaimed. "This galoot isn't Crystal Jack!"

Merced Monte uttered an exclamation of disbelief, and joined his pard at a bound.

"Look! this is no citizen of Satan's Own. In ther name ov Heaven, who is this dead man in buckskin?"

A puzzled expression had already settled over Merced's face.

Before him lay a giant in buckskin, fully armed, and shot through the head!

"I shot this man for Crystal Jack," said the astonished sport. "I'd give a thousand ter know what mission brought him ter camp ter-night."

"He'll never tell yer that, cap'n."

That was true; the buckskinned stalwart was dead.

"Mebbe," said Merced starting up, "mebbe that's more ov 'em about."

Idaho Alf sprung to his feet and looked wildly around.

"Do you know the traitors an' ther true ones?" asked Merced.

"I know 'em all."

"Go an' marshal them. Send them to my cabin—right away! Don't make a mistake. Thar's an old prophecy, yer know, that when ther Dozen divide we'd all be exterminated."

"I know that."

"Wal, we're divided, but I'm goin' ter make that prophecy a lie. Go!"

The pard bounded away, and Merced Monte stood for a moment longer over the man he had shot instead of Crystal Jack.

The words "Remember Shasta" were bearing fruit.

"Time will tell who he is," said Merced turning away. "When ther boys come I'll read ther decree in ther streets ov Satan's Own, an' post it on ther public board before Wisdom Bill's shanty!"

Nobody watched him and no one followed. He went down the street with the air of an unconquered desperado, and with a cocked revolver in his yellowish hand.

"I don't believe ther Velvet Van story," he said, halting in front of the suicide's cabin. "It war one ov Crystal Jack's lies coined for a purpose. Why not investigate it?"

He walked toward the cabin and found the door slightly ajar.

"I knew it war a hoax!" he said lifting the revolver as he pushed the door open. "Velvet Van wouldn't hunt a post like this!"

Becoming emboldened by the silence that followed his words, Merced Monte entered the cabin.

The next moment he struck a match and saw the whole interior of the place.

It was empty.

"Just as I expected—a lie!" he laughed, but as he was about to throw the match away he caught sight of something on the ground which was the cabin floor.

The Desperate Dozen.

He stooped and held the match near the clayey floor for a moment, and then uttered a slight ejaculation.

"Somebody's been hyer lately. Thar ar' boot-prints in the ground."

"Somebody's hyer now!"

Merced Monte sprung erect with a cry of astonishment, and saw a man in the doorway.

"Hold thet match up," said the man. "If you drop it, Merced Monte, you may beat it to ther ground!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE COOL-BLOOD AT WORK.

THE aspect of the man who made the threat was coolness itself, and the flickering match held between finger and thumb told the desperado of Satan's Own that he had met his equal.

"By George! mebbe Crystal Jack's statement thet this shanty hez had a tenant, wasn't a hoax after all," said Merced.

"Maybe not," was the answer. "Thar is a lamp behind you on the shelf. Light it."

"A dead man lit it last."

"I don't care if he did. Light it with the match in your hand. Quick!"

Biting his lips, Merced Monte turned, took down the lamp and succeeded in lighting it with the match he had first struck.

His visitor stepped inside and shut the door.

The two men stood face to face with a rough deal-table between them.

"Wal, Velvet Van, we're face ter face ag'in," began Merced in a half-defiant way. "When you war hyer last you hed us cooped up in Wisdom Bill's ranch. Yer rangers war yer right bowers then; you ar' alone now."

"Alone, but willin' to take danger as it comes," was the reply. "The man you shot awhile ago was not the one you shot for."

"Curse it, no! Do you know 'im?"

"I didn't go ter look. I have business with the man that killed him."

"Thet's me."

Velvet Van's answer was an approving smile.

"You lost some papers the other night," he said, looking Merced in the eye.

"My dockermens!" cried the gold-camp sport. "Montana carried 'em off, an' you forced him ter stan' an' deliver."

"You hev correct information, Merced. I have looked the three documents over carefully. One tells me beyond dispute who Nugget Nora is, an' the others sotlo the identity of another I f'om."

"I'm glad thet they settle so much," said Merced derisively. "You don't pick up papers like them every day, eh?"

"Not by a long shot. The girl is in camp, but you know thet. The prize for which you have been playin' many years is within your grasp, as it were, Merced Monte. You will find her now b'side Montana the man who took her from the pards ov Gold Canyon."

"Thar! I know all this; give me new goods!" said Merced with a wave of the hand. "You hev bizness with me, you say. State it."

A quick step carried Velvet Van half-way around the table.

"I have business with Red Andros, not with Merced Monte," he said. "I deal with the man who stol I'phil Nolan's little daughter, and the will at the same time. I deal with the man who is referred to in the extracts from Mexican papers, which constitute one of the three documents stolen by Montana. The woman called Canyon Clara will deal with Merced Monte."

A strange smile appeared at the corners of Merced's mouth.

"Still harpin' on thet woman?" he exclaimed. "Don't yer know, Velvet Van, thet I'm divorced?"

"Thar will be no divorce until she has reached the end of her game," was the answer. "She deals with you. I am here to play ag'in' Red Andros, the man feared by Philip Nolan, and the man whom he had a right to fear."

"Thet's so!" cried Merced Monte, straightening another inch. "I'm the man! Merced Monte an' Red Andros ar' one an' ther same person. Philip Nolan crossed my path, an' I got even. It war California law then. Nugget Nora is a prize worth playin' for. She is in the trap—so ar' you. I have Satan's Own ter back me; yer yaller pard is not hyer."

"I would spurn his assistance if he war," was the quick retort.

"Then, with ther odds ag'in' you, do you expect ter win?" asked Merced. "Remember! I hev but ter sound ther old signal so well known ther Dozen."

"An' I have but to touch a trigger," was the cool answer. "But I'm not hyer for thet purpose. Hyer, Merced. This paper explains my mission," and Velvet drew from his bosom a paper which he threw upon the table at the desperado's hand.

"Read it an' sign it" accompanied the action, and Merced Monte's fingers closed mechanically upon the paper.

The glittering eyes of the Man from Nowhar watched him intently while he mastered the writing in the light of the little lamp on the shelf behind him.

"TO ALL WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:
the sport from Satan's Own read:

"This paper certifies that I am the man formerly known as Red Andros, that I abducted Philip Nolan's daughter, Nora, when quite small, and that the girl now known as Nugget Nora is the child stolen by me. I also declare that I am the man once known on the Mexican border, as Texas Trump, who one night burned the hacienda of Don Domez, an' assisted in the murder of the owner an' his peons; that the paper signed by Philip Nolan, an' now in the possession of Velvet Van, is the paper taken away with his child. To all this I declare with solemn oath and affixing my name."

When Merced Monte reached the end of this document, there was a wild look in his eyes.

"I sign no paper like that!" he exclaimed, throwing the document upon the table and meeting Velvet Van's look. "I am ther person mentioned in it—I am Red Andros an' Texas Trump. I see no connection between Philip Andros an' Don Domez. Throw some light on this game ov yours, Velvet Van. When we pulled you up as Rosebud Rhoderick, did you then know my identity?"

"No; if I had, we would have ended it all long ago. I suspected—I knew nothin'. The papers Montana took from your cabin revealed all. Show you my hand? By Heavens! I will."

Velvet Van paused a moment.

"I fight for vindication," he went on. "I stand accused ov the crime you committed. I am accused ov stealin' Nugget Nora from her father—though I was but a boy then. For years I have lived under this crime, an' for years I have hunted Red Andros, whom I know as Merced Monte ov Satan's Own. You hid your old name under a new one when you had the girl in your possession; therefore, I could not strike your trail. I hev had many names, too. You hanged me once as Rosebud Rhoderick, an' so well were you playin' it that I did not see Red Andros in you then. When I found the Queen ov Diktown, I saw in her the lost child; then I knew thet the man who stole her could not be far away. We saw through all your schemes—how, with her as your wife an' under a new name, you could go back an' get the fortune, for the tattoo on the girl's shoulder would fix her identity. You've played a shrewd, deep game all these years, Merced Monte."

"Ah! ther forced marriage war a part ov ther game!" cried the boss of Satan's Own. "I see, I see! Yer female pard could allus step in an' say thet she war my wife. Ye've been playin' tergether, you an' Canyon Clara, but you must play ther game out alone! I sign no papers ter-night, Velvet Van."

"You will sign thet one, or drop dead in yer boots!" was the reply, and the hand that rose above the table thrust a revolver into Merced's face. "I haven't inhabited this shanty a dozen hours for nothin'. Thar ar' writin' materials on ther shelf whar ther lamp sets. Ther paper is ready for your name. After signin' it, you kin go out an' raise ther camp. You see no connection between Philip Nolan an' ther hacienda-owner, Don Domez. Perhaps thet is none, but yer present wife is ther Don's child!"

"Canyon Clara?"

"Yes."

"It took work fer me ter keep her hands from you," smiled Velvet Van. "She consented to

marry you to baffle your game for Nugget Nora, an' her fortunes. When I am through with you, I will turn you over to her."

"Then you ar' not brother an' sister as Owlet says."

"For once Owlet has missed it—the cycloedia ov Satan's Own for once has gone wrong," laughe'l the Man from Nowhar. "Now, sir, put your name to that paper."

For a moment Merced Monte stood straight as an arrow before the leveled revolver, and glared across the table into the cool man's face.

"After this settlement comes the doom of the Desperate Dozen," continued Velvet Van. "I am goin' back ter ther old ground with a complete vindication in my hands. You ar' goin' ter sign thet paper or I am goin' ter kill you whar you stand. Get pen an' ink an' go ter work!"

Merced Monte looked like a tiger about to spring upon a foe, but he did not. It would have been no matter to him to have thrown himself across that little table at Velvet Van's throat, but instead, with a sullen, growling oath, he turned to the shelf at his back.

"I'll sign, but I'll shoot afore mornin'!" he hissed under his breath. "I'll write my name among his brains inside ov an hour. By Jupiter! a cooler game than this I never saw played! But I'll rake in at Nora an' ther bonanza!"

His hands took down the pen and bottle that rested on the shelf, and placed them on the table.

"Sign 'Merced Monte of Satan's Own,'" said Velvet Van watching him.

Clutching the pen as though he could have crushed it, the desperado of the Cœur d'Alene country wrote in bold characters the signature ordered by the Man from Nowhar.

"Thar!" he cried throwing down the pen. "Thet satisfies yer, I reckon."

"Perhaps," was the answer, as Velvet Van's

hand drew the paper toward him. "This is good as far as it goes."

"What more is wantin'?" snapped Merced.

"I'll see yer later."

At that moment the door blew open as if to invite the gold sport's exit, and the next second he was at the threshold.

"You an' me for it, Velvet!" he threw madly in the teeth of the cool-blood in the lamplight.

"Ther next play will be made by Red Andros, Texas Trump an' Merced Monte—three men in one! Daylight may kiss more than one dead face in Satan's Own! Stay er go—it's all one ter yer. Velvet Van is doomed! I am still ther boss tiger ov this mountain cage, an' I'll rouse the animiles in it with ther old time roar. Hear me!"

He stopped in the middle of the street before the cabin, and the next moment there pealed from his throat a yell that penetrated to every part of the camp.

"Thet's ther beginnin'! Stay an' see ther end of yer dare!"

The answer was defiance itself.

"Trot out yer man-eaters!" said Velvet Van.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE PLAY THAT FAILED.

THERE was one person at least in the mountain camp to whose heart the wild yell of Merced Monte sent a thrill.

"What means that?" exclaimed Nugget Nora, springing to the little window of Montana's cabin and listening there for a repetition of the cry.

"That war Merced," said the man, lying on the blankets on the floor, as his eyes followed the girl. "I've heard thet yell afore. It is ther rousin' cry ter ther Desprit Dozen. Suthin's goin' ter happen. Thar's goin' ter be a hand played. Ye'r fartin' Crystal Jack didn't drop ther message?"

"He did not. I saw his fingers close upon it. I wrote the words 'Remember Shasta' plainly. He must have read them before this."

"We'll hev ter wait an' see," Montana answered, and then he listened with Nora for noises outside, but none entered the cabin.

"I think," said Montana, after a while, "thet you'd better go."

"Go where?" asked the girl, turning suddenly upon him.

"Away from Satan's Own. You can't do Montana any good. I know more than Dolores does about ther carkiss stretched on this blanket. Fin Fin finished me with knife an' claw. Dolores may talk about fetchin' me through, but it's not in ther deck, Nora; I know it."

"I propose to stay. Unless you actually drive me away. I shall not go."

"But ther man you left?"

"Velvet Van?—He can take care of himself, though I wouldn't give much for his chances if they should discover him. He came here to see Merced Monte, and he will see him before he leaves. He told me that the Dozen were doomed."

"Thet includes me," said Montana, with a smile. "Wal, mebbe he's right, girl. Thar is a prophecy made by an Injun woman a long time ago ter ther effect that when the Dozen Divided its days war numbered. We're divided now—some for Merced, some for me."

"I wish they were all for you," said Nora.

"All but Merced, eh?" laughed the long-haired sport. "Mebbe, arter all, Crystal Jack hez forgotten thet night in ther shadder ov Shasta—mebbe; he—"

"Hush! some one is outside," interrupted the girl.

Instantly Montana's hand moved to a revolver under the blanket, and closed firmly about its silver-mounted grip.

A wonderful stillness had followed the wild yell that had penetrated every quarter of the camp, and in it Nora had caught the sound of some one beyond the cabin.

"Come hyer," said Montana in a whisper. "I did not tell you before, but I will now. While you war away awhile ago, it seemed ter me thet suthin' came down from the rafters overhead an' slipped cut ther door. I cculdn't hev been dreamin', but I war lyin' on my side with my face turned away. I heard it, but whether man or animile, I don't know what it war. Mebbe it's out ther an' wants to git in."

Nugget Nora rose and glided to the door.

"Stan' thar, whoever comes," she heard a voice say outside. "Ef I'm not mistaken thet biggest game ever played in Satan's Own ar' goin' ter be played afore mornin'. Thet's yer post. Stan' thar whoever comes, I say. You know whom we depend on ter-night."

The speaker moved away as he uttered the last sentence, and Nora looking out the little window saw the figure of a man in rough garments near the door.

"The man who moved away is Crystal Jack—I know it," she murmured. "A crisis of some kind is at hand; the two-worded message is producing its effect."

She did not go back to the man on the floor, the dark-faced, long-haired man whose grip on the pistol had grown firmer than ever; something seemed to glue her to the window.

The moments seemed hours to the girl.

All at once she heard a voice that startled Montana on his blankets, and brought him despite his terrible hurts upon his elbow.

"All who ar' not for me ar' ag'in' me!" said this voice. "I've posted ther decree on ther post, an' I stan' by it, ef I stan' alone. Ther galoot from Nowhar hez left camp; so we attend ter ther traitors now. Half-breed tigers can't run this camp; it takes a full-blooded Bengal beast ter do that, an' I'm a full blood!"

"An' hyer's another!"

Nora started at the deep husky voice behind her, and the next moment she saw Montana get upon his feet and stagger toward the door.

"No! no!" she cried clutching his arm. "For heaven's sake go back to your cot."

"Thet war a challenge out thar!" said Montana wrenching himself from the girl's hand. "It war meant for his enemies, an' ain't I one ov 'em now, henceforth an' forever? Let me out—let ther two tigers ov Satan's Own meet for ther last time!"

But Nugget Nora threw herself resolutely between the mad sport and the door. She tried to push him back.

"It's all a play for you, girl," he said. "An' Montana's ready ter throw his last cards on ther board."

"Not for me—not while I am here. There is a guard before the cabin. Crystal Jack has just put him there. He stands between us an' the Satan from Merced county."

"Then the message did not fail. It has turned Crystal Jack. Merced Monte hez no right lower now!"

Montana neither retreated nor advanced. Nora stood firmly between him and the door, and the little lamp burning fitfully against the wall revealed this singular tableau.

All at once the girl felt a shudder pass through the arms she held; she saw the long-haired sport reel toward the cot.

She could not hold him up, for he was a giant, and she had to see him whirl half-way round and fall like a man struck with death.

"Dead! My God!" exclaimed Nora, springing forward.

"Not yet," said Montana trying to rise. "I am ter pay Fin Fin for his work yet—I know it!"

At that a strange half-tigerish cry came in from without, and a heavy body fell against the door.

"Heavens!" ejaculated the girl starting up. "It has come!" and then the door flew open and two struggling bodies fell into the room!

Two men in a desperate grapple for the mastery were they who landed at Nora's feet. No wonder she shrunk away.

One was undoubtedly the guard stationed at the door by Crystal Jack; she knew him by his build and his garments, but the other writhed and twisted, so that in the uncertain light she could not make him out.

The struggle, though fearful, was of brief duration in the presence of the spellbound spectators.

"'Melican man no beat the Chinee!" said a voice, as a knife was driven home two terrible times in rapid succession and the guard's hands relaxed.

The next instant one of the combatants leaped up and whirled upon Nora.

"Heavens! The yellow traitor!" she cried.

"Yes, yes. Fin Fin find 'Melican girl ag'in'!" chuckled the man who sprung at her like a leopard, his dark hand darting straight for her throat. "She ran off from him in cave, but him findee her, allec samee!"

Horror-stricken, the Queen of Dirktown retreated from the Chinaman's hand, but nothing daunted, and with a fiendish laugh, he bounded after her.

"Fin Fin catchee 'Melican girl. She no got away this time."

The Celestial did not see the man lying on the floor, in his haste to seize the young girl, pushed to the wall by his charge.

Suddenly a pair of hands went up and caught him by the legs!

"I didn't look for you, you almond-eyed imp, but I told Nore that death wouldn't eucher me till I hed paid ye back!" said a voice, as the Chinaman found himself tripped and in the arms of the long-haired pard before he could draw a weapon. "Whar's yer throat? Ah! I've got it! I'll be satisfied ter pass in my checks with my fingers thar!"

It was a desperate struggle that Fin Fin made against the terrible grip that had fastened at his throat like some horrid vise.

Nugget Nora looked on motionless and speechless.

It was an admirable chance for her to escape, but she did not think of doing so.

"Hard ter kill, eh?" grated Montana. "I die hard myself, as you know by this time. Yer might as well struggle ag'in' fate as ag'in' ther man frem Perdition Plains at this time. Hy Nora! Look at this Chinese rattler. Hold ther lamp down ter his face."

The girl caught up the lamp and held it near the face of the man with whom Montana had struggled.

A terrible sight rewarded her trouble. Fin Fin's eyes were starting from their sockets; he scarcely looked like a human being!

Montana's face was distorted by a fiendish smile, while he held the face up for the girl's inspection.

"He'll never claw another sinner from ther Plains!" grinned the long-haired sport. "Ain't he a daisy, girl? Now I'm ready for Merced."

His hands left the Chinaman's throat and the victim fell at Nora's feet.

"I'm afraid ther finished me too," groaned Montana. "But Jehosaphat! warn't it a victory?"

His eyes blazed with the wildest kind of triumph, he quivered and fell back!

"Hello!" said a voice at the door. "All dead in hyer?"

"Not all, I hope," responded Nugget Nora and a bound carried her to the threshold. "If you had come but a minute sooner, Crystal Jack!"

"Ha, ha! Thar's no Jack hyer," was the rough laugh that greeted her, and a hand closed about her wrist and in the fall of an eyelash jerked her across the threshold.

The girl looked into the triumphant face again, and saw her mistake.

It was Merced Monte!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

OWLLET'S FATAL PLAY.

"DON'T try ter go back ter ther long-haired pard," said Merced while his bronzed fingers seemed to sink into the girl's wrist. "Thet's a kind o' wild lay-out that ther lamp shows in thar."

He leaned forward and looked into the cabin, and saw the wild tableau presented there.

Three men on the floor apparently dead.

"It's not worth while for me ter go in an' settle with Montana," he continued. "He war a fool fer takin' a hand in ther game that didn't invite him. Wal, it war fate."

"Fate perhaps," said Nora boldly. "There will be another turn of fate soon if I am not mistaken."

The response was a mad look, and then a low laugh.

"Not while Merced plays," said the desperado at the end of it. "Thar ar' tigers loose ter-night in Satan's Own an' I'm one ov ther number."

The next moment the girl hurried away, and presently found herself an inmate of another cabin similar in construction to the one she had just left.

"This fort will be held of all hell storms it," said Merced Monte, looking down into her face as he released her wrist. "This is Merced Monte's home, an' hyer no man comes without permission. You will stay hyer, my California rosebud. Ther pluckin' of yer ag'in' my wishes, will cost ther picker his life."

He was at the door before Nugget Nora could reply and a minute later she was alone with the little tin lamp on a shelf overhead shedding a poor light about the apartment.

The door was shut and did not open under her efforts.

She walked back from it with a sigh and a fainting sensation at her heart.

"In his hands again!" she exclaimed. "Merciful God! is it to end thus? Must Merced Monte win in this wild drama of the gold lands and with me for a prize?"

"He needn't ter!" said a voice at her feet and Nora, starting back, saw a figure rise from the shadow of the table and stand before her.

A cry was at the girl's lips but she suppressed it.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"Men call me Owlet," was the answer accompanied by a grin.

"Ah! you are Owlet! I have heard of you," said Nora leaning forward and gazing into the two little black eyes that shone like a serpent's.

"I'm called ther cyclopedia ov Satan's Own because I know a little about everything, I guess," laughed Owlet. "Do I look like a man-eater?"

"No," but still Nora thought those eyes unnaturally bright and full of deviltry. "Merced Monte didn't see you?"

"And I was not going ter tell him that I war hyer," was the reply. "He wouldn't hav let me stay in all probability, ha! ha! Ther cyclopedia is no fool ef he isn't a giant!"

"But you have intimated that I need not remain a prisoner here."

"So I hev, an' I mean it, too."

"The door is fastened."

"On the outside—one ov Merced Monte's time locks that won't open till ther time he comes back. But thar ar' other ways out," and Owlet threw a rapid glance toward the roof.

The girl understood the look, and started toward the little man with eagerness depicted on her countenance.

"Let it be at once then," she cried. "Do me the favor to show me the way to freedom. I want to get out of here."

"To go back ter Montana, I suspect," said Owlet to himself, while his glittering eyes almost betrayed him. "Wal, my daisy, you may get out, but you'll still be in Owlet's clutches."

Then he said aloud to Nora.

"Out it shall be."

"Now!" cried the girl eagerly.

"Right away."

The little man with the coal black eyes sprung to the logs, and clambered nimbly to the rafters. Nora watched him intently.

"A friend in need," she said while she looked. "Fortune has sent me the strange man, Owlet."

In a short time the nimble hands of Owlet had made an opening in the clapboard roof, and the girl below caught the glitter of the stars.

"Now," said the little sport, coming half-way down and extending a hand to her. "I've made a way out ov this trap, an' we'll give ther boss tiger ov this ranch ther slip."

Nora was grasped by the hand, and, with some assistance from herself, was drawn up to the roof.

She was on the verge of freedom; the descent on the outside would be nothing.

Owlet helped her through the opening, and steadied her on the uppermost log until he could let himself out.

"Hark!" said Nora, clutching the little man's sleeve. "There is a man below us—a guard!"

"I guess not," was the reply as Owlet leaned over the ledge and looked down. "My eyes never deceive me, girl."

"But I see the guard. Who is he but Merced Monte's pard?"

Owlet looked over the girl's arm and presently saw what had startled her—a dark figure in the shadow of the desperado's cabin.

"Yes," said a rough voice at that moment, "you kin bet yer life that I'm Merced's pard, an' unless you get back inter ther shanty, I'll tumble yer back dead!"

They saw more than a man now; they noticed the revolver that covered them.

"Foiled!" ejaculated Nora, while Owlet gnashed his teeth till they fairly cracked.

"We must take another plan," said the little man, when they stood once more in the light of the lamp. "Merced Monte hez put guards about you, girl. Oh! ye'r ther bonanza for which this mountain game is played."

"Would to Heaven I were not the prize!" was the earnest ejaculation. "Go, and leave me here. Let me face Merced when he comes back and fight my own battles."

"Not ef this individual knows himself," said Owlet. "Let me see. What's ter be done next? Ther door!"

He went forward and inspected the heavy portal. His eyes flashed and his veins swelled as he looked.

"If it war gittin' in I'd break ther door down!" he cried. "I'm little, Nora, but I kin turn myself inter a batterin'-ram. I'd give ther world ter be on ther outside jes' now."

"You can't force the door as it is!"

"Not much."

He stood silent for a moment and then suddenly clutched the girl's arm.

"I take ther last chance," he said. "Stand still an' see what Owlet can do when they coop him up."

He was at the logs once more, and Nora watched him climb noiselessly to the roof.

What was he going to do?—there was a guard outside.

Owlet looked carefully over the upper log when he had gained the position, and singled out the man below.

"He'll think it a thunderbolt," the little man chuckled to himself, as he watched the guard.

"I jumped on a fellow's head once in Texas, an' broke his neck. I'll try the same game ag'in."

The following moment Owlet cast himself from the log and jumped down at the unsuspecting rough! The descent did not occupy a second, and all at once the guard was crushed before he knew that the human thunderbolt had started.

"Ketch this weasel asleep!" laughed Owlet, as his hands closed at the rough's throat. "I kin make chain-lightnin' out o' myself in less than a minute."

The girl listening at the logs inside heard a faint struggle beyond them, then all was still.

"He will come back now. This is the man whom Crystal Jack called a traitor. Will he betray me?"

She did not have long to wait in the weird lamplight, for a head appeared suddenly at the opening above, and then the figure of Owlet came down the logs.

"Beat me—beat Pandemonium," he laughed as he dropped beside her. "Ther coast is cl'ar now, girl. We'll git away from ther boss tiger ov Satan's Own this time."

She was not loth to depart, and five minutes later she stood on the ground below and outside the cabin.

But Owlet's hand still clutched her wrist.

"Free!" she cried. "I owe you a debt I can never repay. I can go back to Montana now. I trust he still lives."

"To Montana?" echoed Owlet, and his black eyes seemed to laugh. "I will show you the way; come with me. Montana! Yes; I know the way."

Nugget Nora followed him, his grip still at her wrist, and his eyes riveted upon her.

"Hold!" she suddenly cried, halting and drawing back. "This is not the way to Montana. We have passed his cabin; we are leaving the camp."

"Who said we war not?" was the answer.

"Look hyer, girl! D'yer think I don't know ther value ov a nugget when I get my fingers on it? I'm Owlet ov Satan's Own—ther boss ov all men at cool games. I know yer value, Montana, Merced, an' Velvet Van wouldn't play for a lead-mine—not much! Open yer mouth ter give ther alarm, an' thar'll be fingers at yer throat in a jiffy!"

A strange, a fainting sensation stole over the girl, but she shook it off.

"I must escape from this monster," she said to herself. "He is no better than Fin Fin, no better than Merced. Heaven help me to escape!"

"We'll leave these diggin's," continued Owlet. "No drawin' back now. Merced an' an altar ar' behind yer. Thar'll be a desperate game played hyer afore daylight—they're all hyer ter play it. I kin beat giants when I play."

"Now or never!" said the girl resolutely, and then drawing her splendid figure suddenly to its true hight, she jerked herself away.

"I've given tigers the slip before now!" she exclaimed, when she found herself free from the grip of the Cyclopedia.

With a wild, half-brutish cry Owlet started after her, and his hand barely missed her shoulder.

Fear and horror lent the girl new speed. She fled back toward the cabins, toward Montana's cabin.

Owlet, with grated teeth, sprung madly after her.

"Hyer! what does this mean?" cried a stern voice, and there leaped between the girl and her pursuer the figure of a man.

The next moment Owlet ran against him, and a pair of huge hands lifted him bodily from the ground.

"Jerusalem! it is Owlet!" cried the interferer. "See hyer, my man-viper, ye've gathered in too much news for yer own good. Satan's Own doesn't want yer hyer when ther big fight comes off. I'll jes' toss yer ag'in' my old shanty. Ef yer break a log in, all right!"

Owlet struggled, but in that grip it was useless. The man was Crystal Jack, a veritable giant, and the next moment he lifted the little man above his head and flung him headlong against the thick logs of the nearest cabin.

It was a terrible and a merciless throw, and the Cyclopedia of Satan's Own sunk to the ground with a faint groan.

"How did ther girl get out ov Montana's cabin?" said Crystal Jack, as he turned away. "In less than five minutes ther cyclone is ter burst. I've got four ov ther Dozen ag'in' Merced. I can't go back on ther man who says, 'Remember Shasta,' even though it makes a traitor ov me. Nora must hev gone back to Montana."

Crystal Jack started off at a rapid pace. He passed more than a dozen men standing like statues between the ghostly cabin. These were the silent fellows we have seen advancing through the mountains upon the camp. Crystal Jack saw them not.

He was not long in reaching Montana's shanty. The door stood half-open, and he hesitated not to push his way in.

The little lamp still burned on the shelf, and two men lay in its light.

"Hello! who hev we hyer?" said Jack, stooping over the figures. "Jehu! this one is my guard, an' that one—Fin Fin, ther yaller pard!"

Nugget Nora was not to be seen, and even Montana was gone.

Crystal Jack sprung up with an exclamation of surprise, and at that moment a shot was fired. The "cyclone" had burst.

CHAPTER XXXV.

STEPPING IN BETWEEN.

The man who fired the shot was not more than a dozen rods from Montana's cabin, and he lowered his revolver coolly after the report.

"I guess that settles another," he said, glancing once at the stalwart figure that lay in the starlight where a man had struck. "They hev turned on Merced, their captain—a part ov 'em hev. Crystal Jack keeps his distance. Let 'im stay thar!"

Merced Monte turned toward his own cabin with the smoking revolver in his right hand.

He had posted the famous decree on the so-called bulletin-board in front of the deserted saloon, and on his way back had caught sight of one of the men who had left him for Montana's cause.

The discovery and the shot were the work of a mad moment, and Merced knew that it would work a terrible era in the history of Satan's Own.

Opening his cabin door he found the place empty. Nugget Nora was gone, and the fastenings of the door had not been disturbed.

The boss of the gold-camp was amazed, but the hole in the roof soon rewarded his inspection, and he dashed from the shanty with a wild oath.

"It is the work of the cool-head from No-whar!" he exclaimed. "Ther girl did not escape without help; that war impossible!"

In the starlight he stopped to collect his thoughts.

"She may be gone back ter Montana," he

suddenly exclaimed; "thet is, if she wasn't helped out by Velvet Van. I'll go thar an' settle accounts with ther long-haired sinner."

Crystal Jack was not far from the cabin when Merced Monte looked in upon the tableau on the floor.

"Two dead men, an' neither one Montana!" he said. "He warn't able ter get away himself. I don't understand thir. Whar is he, anyhow?"

"Cap'n, ther devil's ter pay ag'in," said a voice behind him, and the desperado wheeled to confront one of his own men.

"Wal, what's ter pay now?" he asked.

"By ther eternal heavens! ther old camp's full ov strange men," was the answer. "We kin find 'em between ther cabins. Ther man yer shot for Crystal Jack, isn't whar he fell, an'—"

"Velvet Van's pards! They hev come back!" interrupted Merced. "Whar ar' ther boys?"

"Gathered in ther shadder ov Wisdom Bill's ranch. They jes' caught ther girl."

"Caught who—Nora?"

"Yes."

Merced Monte seemed to leave the ground.

"Jupiter! this is news that makes a spring-board out o' me!" he cried. "In ther shadder ov Wisdom's ranch, eh? That's ther best catch they ever made for their cap'n!"

He waited to hear no more, but sprung away with devouring eagerness, and came upon several men who stopped him with their revolvers.

"Whar's Nora?" asked Merced anxiously and before he could be answered he saw the Queen of Dirkton before him.

"Out o' ther pan inter ther fire, eh?" he laughed, clutching Nora's wrist. "When you beat Merced Monte, Satan will turn saint. Ther man what helped yer out at ther roof didn't stan' by yer! Thar ar' traitors in camp ter-night. Ther woods ar' full ov 'em!"

Nugget Nora made no reply.

"Boys, ther first plan is ter save ther prize worth more than this infernal camp," continued Merced, addressing his men. "We move upon ther corral an' get ther best hosses. A new Satan's Own may flourish elsewhere, an' that no enemy shall play his desperate hand—no Montana ter turn ag'in' us, an' no galoot from No-whar ter molest us!"

The men seemed on the eve of cheering the speaker, but they beat down that desire, and waited for him to go on.

"For ther corral now!" he said. "Revolvers ready an' triggers touched. Forward!"

With his hand still at Nora's wrist, Merced Monte moved away and the faithful few of the Dozen fell in behind him.

"Halt!" suddenly rung out a voice before the band had advanced thirty steps.

The men stopped and up went the heavy revolvers gripped by their bronze hands.

"It's a fight ter ther death," whispered Merced over his shoulder.

"Throw down them hands!" said the same voice that had halted the banded toughs. "We ar' nineteen, Merced Monte, an' ther Winchesters ov Gold Canyon ar' at yer breasts."

"Ov Gold Canyon!" cried Merced who saw by this time the nineteen stalwarts by whom he and his men were confronted.

"Hang me! ef I didn't think you war Velvet Van's pards."

"Not much. We ar' ther men of Dirkton, but now ov Gold Canyon, an' our guest is ther girl at yer side. Montana took her away at ther revolver's muzzle, but we claim our right to hold her till we've made terms with you."

"Thar's a chance," said Merced in a low tone, and he pushed Nora back to the men behind him while he stepped coolly toward the leveled Winchesters of the Gold Canyon pards.

"When did yer come?" he asked.

"We got in awhile ago. Captain Merced, we happen ter know suthin' about ther value ov ther prize we've guarded for yer. We want our share!"

Merced Monte madly bit his lip. Every moment was precious.

"What's ther ransom?" he asked.

"Ten thousand."

"Jehosaphat," he exclaimed. "I'm no bonanza king. You'd better take the girl herself."

"Hand her over!"

But Merced Monte drew back with a gesture of refusal.

"What! give Nora up at this stage of the game? Darn me! ef I don't scatter her brains toward ther stars first!" he cried. "When I turn ther Queen ov Dirkton over ter these robbers in buckskin, er pay ther ransom, I'll sup with Satan!"

"Come, captain. We can't parley," said the leader of the nineteen. "Ther girl or ther ransom! It's all in yer hands."

"Let me consult ther boys."

"Be quick about it. Forward!"

The line moved toward the little group toward which Merced Monte stepped with terrible determination in his flashing eyes.

Suddenly he caught Nora's arm and his revolver struck against her temple.

The nineteen were near enough to see it all.

"Gents," laughed Merced flendishly, "my ransom is in my revolver! Throw down yer Winchesters an' turn yer backs upon us, er I'll blow ther beauty's brains out! Thar's no play

with ther boss tiger ov Satan's Own. Ye've given him ter much rope, yer see."

The startled girl looked into the faces of the men who stood near, each with a rifle at his shoulder and with the deadly trigger touched.

"She knows what I'll do," continued the desperate sport. "Do you think I'll hand her over ter ther men who went back on me at Dirkton an' substituted the corpse ov an Injun girl for my protegee? When I do that, rats ov Dirkton, ther stars will fall. I count three, gents. One—two—"

Merced Monte paused of his own accord and glanced at the buckskin line.

Not a man had moved, not a Winchester had fallen.

"Go on. Count it out," their silence said.

"Curse yer! when is ther ransom ter be paid?" cried Merced.

"Within three days; we'll be liberal, captain, but we shall stay hyer till ther fund guaranteed."

The revolver of the desperado crept down from Nora's temples; the cool men from Gold Canyon would have let him carry out his threat.

"Well, I'll pay," said Merced with pretended sullenness. "Throw down yer guns now."

"Toss ther girl this way. We hold her till this thing is settled."

But Merced Monte drew back again.

"It's only fair, Captain Merced," a new voice said. "Ther pards ov Gold Canyon will be responsible for her safety."

"Who ar' you?"

Merced Monte whirled upon the speaker and leaned forward with eagerness.

The voice had thrilled him, and well it might, for the figure he saw made him recoil.

"In heaven's name! whar did you come from?" he cried. "I thought—"

"Thet we were divorced forever?" was the interruption. "Not yet, Merced—not yet! The next time you chcke your bride be sure there is no Celestial near to play a happy hand in the nick of time."

"Did he do it—thet almond-eyed heathen?"

"I owe my life to him."

"Wal, he's dead enough now, thank fortune! An' you—you!—what's ter be yer next play?"

The woman laughed.

"In the first place, Merced Monte, you turn the girl over to the Dirkton pards. While I am your wife, remember that you can have no other."

The ruffian glared at Canyon Clara with the ferocity of a tiger. He even sprung forward, but halted in front of a revolver which was raised in an instant.

"Not another step!" said the woman, calmly.

"The papers now in the hands of Velvet Van call you Texas Trump, the Vulture of the Texas Border, who swooped down upon the hacienda of Don Domez, an' killed without mercy there. My hand is the proper one to avenge that infamous deed. I can shoot you dead at the head of the few members of your league who have remained true to your fortunes. You should perish with them. Now, sir, turn the Queen of Dirkton over to the pards who have sold you out, an' go back an' die like a man."

For a moment the mountain rough looked at the beautiful creature who confronted him, and turned upon the girl.

"Thar's yer friends for ther present," he said.

"But remember! even when their droppers guard you, ther Merced Monte's game is not played out!"

Nora, with a bound, sprung away, not to the canyon pards, but toward the woman of vengeance.

"Heavens! not to those men!" she exclaimed.

"Montana took me from them, an' I would have nursed him through the shades of death for it. Let me go with you!"

Canyon Clara looked down into the face of the pleading girl and their eyes met.

"With me it shall be," she said, and the next moment her eyes fell upon the nineteen pards. "When Merced pays the ransom I will turn the prize over to him," she continued, with a faint smile.

"No, no! not to him either," cried the girl.

There was no answer only that Canyon Clara caught Nora's wrist and led her away despite the looks of more than twenty men.

"Fear not!" she said in a whisper to the Queen of Dirkton. "The ransom will never be paid. You will not fall back into the hands of the canyon toughs. This night they play the game out!"

"It is near morning now."

They did not look back but kept down the camp thoroughfare, the hands of Canyon Clara entwining Nora's wrist with much tenderness.

They did not see Merced Monte turn to his men, nor hear him say to them in low tones:

"Meet me at my shanty inside ov twenty minutes. If thar are any cowards among yer, leave camp at once. Remember! Out of this trap is a new Satan's Own, an' a big bonanza for all who remain ez true ez steel."

He turned away and hurried from the spot.

"They think ther last hand will be a fool one!" he hissed. "Wal, ther fools! Ther lease ov wedded life ther woman enjoys with me shall be briefer than a moth's! She came back at ther wrong time! Ho! I'm Merced yet!"

He was at the door of his cabin, but stopped there and lifted the revolver he carried.

"Somebody's invaded my ranch," he said.

"Thet's so, captain. Go in an' see."

Merced Monte wheeled, and confronted a man.

"Crystal Jack!" he cried.

"Bet yer life, Merced. Go in an' see yer visitor."

The hand of Crystal Jack fell upon the ruffian's shoulder, and the boss of Satan's Own was pushed across the threshold. He almost fell headlong into his own cabin, but recovered in a second, and was greeted by a man who leaned heavily against the table.

"I've—waited—long," said this person. "Doctor Dolores—patched—me—up thet I—might—play ag'in—yer, cap'n—for Phil Nolan's—child!"

Merced Monte had already halted.

"Montana!" he exclaimed. "By heavens! if it hadn't been for you, I'd not hev loster-night."

He darted forward at the man at the table, but a hand clutched his arm, and as he was thrown back Crystal Jack said:

"I'm for Montana! He saved my life in Shasta land, an' all he hed ter say now ter ketch me war, 'Remember Shasta?'"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

AFTER ALL—JUSTICE.

NOBODY had seen the desperately wounded, long-haired sport creep from his own cabin to that of his rival during the interval between Nora's capture by Merced and his return.

With death tugging at his heart, Montana had dragged himself through the starlight with one burning desire left—to end the rivalry for Nugget Nora, and to fight the sport who for years had been playing a deep game for her.

Crystal Jack had discovered by accident that Montana had changed cabins, and when he told Merced that his shanty was inhabited he knew who waited for him beyond the door.

Well might the boss of Satan's Own exhibit surprise. Beaten by the Gold Canyon pards and Canyon Clara, he stood face to face with Montana, and a man whom he had loved to call his right bower but a traitor now—Crystal Jack.

"Yes," said Jack, looking at the amazed ruffian. "I am Montana's pard—yours no longer, Cap'n Merced."

"Mine! mine!" cried Montana leaving the table. "Ther Dozen hez fallen ter pieces, Merced, an' ther Injun's prophecy comes in pat now!"

"Ter Hades with ther prophecy!" was the answering cry. "Stand back, Crystal, an' let me at ther first violator ov ther oath ov ther League."

"Not while I'm hyer!"

The fury of a tiger seemed to possess Merced Monte; he wheeled squarely up on his right bower, and then dashed straight at him.

"Tiger ag'in' tiger!—so let it be!" he yelled.

The two men met like giants, and before the wounded Montana could collect his thoughts, they were against the table, and the next moment over it went, throwing him to the floor.

Crystal Jack was the stronger; he had no wound to weaken him, but Merced Monte was no weakling.

Montana looked on for a moment, and then threw himself at the two men.

Merced Monte shook him off, and he fell back with a cry.

Whether it was heard or not, a figure appeared in the doorway and then a man leaped into the cabin.

"Shake yerselves loose hyer!" he said, seizing Merced, the first one he encountered, and with the strength of a Samson he tore the men apart.

It was the work of a second for the newcomer, and holding Merced at arm's length, he looked into his eyes with a light laugh.

"I've been waitin' for you ter trot out yer tigers. Is this ther way you do it?" he cried. "I allow no man ter kill you, Merced Monte."

"By heavens! you'll except this mountain chick!" and Crystal Jack made a spring forward.

"I except nobody," was the answer. "The crime of the hacienda is ter be avenged by the hand of woman!"

"She hed a chance awhile ago, but she wouldn't take it!" growled Merced.

"She'll take it when I give the word."

"Show me ther tigress, Velvet Van!"

Crystal Jack stood by and glared at the cool blood who had stepped between when his life was probably in great danger.

"Your pard is dead?" said the Man from Nowhar glancing at the human figure which had fallen across the overturned table. "I guess Montana has played his last hand out."

Crystal Jack turned and bent over the long-haired sport. The next instant a pair of arms were thrown upward and fell about Jack's neck where they closed in a deathly embrace.

"I'll take yer with me, Merced!" said Montana hoarsely. "By Jupiter! ther two captains ov ther Coer d'Alene kentry will reach ther end together!"

Crystal Jack felt the arms tighten with an indescribable horror.

"Great Caesar! I'm not Merced!" he cried. "Montana! I'm yer stand-by now. I'm Crystal Jack—ov Shasta's Shadde!"

But it availed nothing. The almost lifeless arms seemed to contract more and more. Crystal Jack writhed in the deadly embrace.

"I'm—not—Merced!" he said. "Jehu! choked ter death by a pard. Help!—help!"

But no hand was put forth to relieve him from the awful trap, and if he had looked around, he would have seen that Velvet Van and Merced Monte had disappeared.

Outside, two men were hastening through the camp—the Man from Nowhar, and the boss of Satan's Own, side by side.

They passed to the end of the camp.

"Halt!" said Velvet Van, and then raising his voice he said, as if addressing some one:

"We ar' hyer!"

Scarcely had the words ceased to sound when a slight figure sprung into view and Merced uttered a name:

"Canyon Clara!"

"In other words, your wife," was the reply. "No! let me not think of myself in that light—let me remember only the hacienda's one dark night. I want to remember Texas Trump and his vultures. It has been a long trail, Merced Monte, and, but for my desire to help Velvet Van and to baffle your designs against Nora, I should have avenged the past before this."

The night fraught with wild excitement and thrilling incident was passing away, and the glimmer of day was penetrating the lingering darkness.

Merced Monte glancing down saw the shapey hand of Canyon Clara clutching a revolver.

"I guess I'm ter be shot like a Greaser shoots a dog!" he suddenly said. "I'm ter hev no chance."

"Give him one!" said a voice and a person not noticed before appeared at the avenger's side. "I have nothing to thank him for. He robbed my father of his child, hardly out of her cradle, he turned her over to a lot of ruffians of his stamp—then his tools. Give him a chance."

The fair pleader was Nugget Nora bending over Clara's arm while she spoke.

"I thought you'd be the last person on earth to plead for him," said the avenger glancing down into the girl's face.

"I can't help it."

"He shall have the chance. Let him fight me for life or death!" said the Man from Nowhar.

A fierce look was Merced Monte's reply, and then he exclaimed:

"I'll do that. For life or death!"

"I will not consent to that, but he shall fight me."

"You?" cried Merced. "My wife? By Jehu! that sends a thrill of joy ter my heart! A duel with my evil genius? Mark off ther ground, an' give me a weapon!"

Velvet Van looked a remonstrance into the cold, cruel eyes of the heiress of the desolated ranch.

"After all, Nora," she whispered to the person at her side. "After all, his shall be the death of the dog."

"Six paces—back to back!" she continued, addressing Velvet Van. "March him away and give him a revolver."

"Quick! I want ter clutch a dropper ag'in!" was the tough's ejaculation. "My eye hez lost none ov its keenness, ner my hand its cunnin'. Six paces, eh? I'll step 'em off myself, tigress, an' I'll make 'em good ones too."

His last glance at the woman standing proudly erect in the morning light, was full of ferocity, and he walked steadily away with a revolver in his hand.

Six paces away he stopped, and straightened.

"Ready, I am!" he said, glancing over his shoulder. "Will yer count for us, Velvet?"

"Yes."

Canyon Clara had already taken her station with her back to the man who was waiting for the signal with much impatience.

Suddenly there came the sharp cracks of several revolvers from the camp, and a man in buckskin came bounding toward the dueling-ground.

"Halt, an' hands up!" cried Velvet Van, throwing up his revolver.

"It is Magic Mark," said Merced.

"Very well. Magic Mark stands whar he is," was the answer.

"Captain, ther men who surrounded us ther night we war skinnin' ther heathen hev come!" said Magic Mark. "They stand face ter face with ther pards from Gold Canyon."

"What! my men back again?" exclaimed Velvet Van.

"They hold ther camp."

"Go on with this duel," said Canyon Clara. "No battle between Regulators an' roughs puts it off now. Count five, Velvet Van. At five we wheel and fire."

Merced Monte said "All right," and awaited the signal.

"Ef I drop her," flashed through his brain, "I'll follow it with ther doom ov ther Man from Nowhar. I kin do it in ther drop ov an eyelash."

The next moment Velvet Van began to count slowly, and with distinctness. At "three" nobody moved; at "four" Merced Monte's grip tightened on the revolver.

Suddenly "five" was spoken.

Simultaneously two persons wheeled, and two arms went up. At the same second two revolvers spoke, their sharp voices blending into one sound on the morning air, though but one person fell.

Canyon Clara, with a sharp cry, reeled and fell at Nora's feet.

"Aha!" cried Merced. "Divorced now, I reckon—forever!"

He had already turned to the astonished spectator from Nowhar.

"Yer turn next!" he exclaimed in a hiss.

Velvet Van was taken aback, and for once in his life the cool head was off his guard.

Merced Monte seemed to throw himself forward as he leveled his revolver at the man in plush, but the finger shrunk suddenly from the trigger, he uttered a cry as if an arrow had pierced his heart, and staggered away!

Canyon Clara's shot had not been thrown away!

Velvet Van walked to where the boss of the gold camp fell, and looked down into the face upturned.

"Ther game's played through!" was all he said ere he turned away.

Yes, played through, for Merced Monte was dead!

With a glance at Nugget Nora bending over Canyon Clara, he walked toward Magic Mark, the man who had witnessed this strange duel with but few wits about him, and said:

"About face an' back ter camp."

"Back ter yer Ranger-Regulators who hev decreed ther doom ov ther Desperate Dozen?" cried the man, hesitating.

"Back ter camp!"

There was no alternative; the look of the Man from Nowhar was enough, and Magic Mark re-entered Satan's Own covered by an eye that never quailed.

A glance told Velvet Van that the desperado had not misreported affairs.

In the first gleams of dawn, five-and-twenty men, dark-faced but handsome, and looking determined, had swooped down upon the factions of the mountain camp.

Everybody had been surprised, and the pards from Gold Canyon waiting for Merced Monte's ransom money not least among the number.

The three men who attempted resistance on the spur of the moment already lay dead in their heavy boots, and the camp was in the possession of the backers of the Man from Nowhar.

It is not our intention, reader, to detail the scenes that followed.

We have fittingly reached the close of our mountain romance. To go into details here would be to deal with a somewhat wholesale avenging of deeds which date far back of the opening of our story.

When night came again Satan's Own had fewer citizens than the morning sun had risen upon, and the Desperate Dozen was only a name and not a league.

Crystal Jack was found dead in the stiffened embrace of a sport with long hair. The words "Remember Shasta" had been his doom.

The pards of Gold Canyon went back to their haunts with no ransom money, for the form and revolver of Velvet Van stood between them and Nugget Nora, to say nothing of the rifles of the Ranger-Regulators.

The game had been played to the end, and death had shaken the cards from the hands of the most desperate players.

Canyon Clara, wounded but not dead, went from the spot with Velvet Van and turned her back forever upon the gold-camp.

A month later the managers of a certain vast estate in California were confronted by a handsome man in velvet and a beautiful young girl, and with a smile of triumph the man presented certain papers.

"I guess they won't say I did it after this," he said. "Gents, it war a long hunt for vindication an' justice, but I'm at ther end ov it. If Philip Nolan could see those papers he would know that I didn't rob him cf his child!"

The return was a sensation, and the man in plush gave his companion a proud look as he said:

"Behind you forever, Nora, ar' ther mountain pards an' misery—ahead a home an' the biggest bonanza under ther coast skies. I guess I kin perambulate now."

Rather strange to say, he did not go far.

It seemed that the face of the Queen of Dirkton was destined to make another conquest, and not long after the return Velvet Van made her his bride.

One of the wedding guests was a tall, pale-faced but very beautiful woman who said to the fair wife:

"I'll build a new home on the old hacienda, and you shall come there, Nora."

But she never did, for the wound of the duel interfered, and Canyon Clara, the avenger of the ranch, lies under the California flowers.

Satan's Own is still inhabited, and "Doctor" Dolores is now the boss of the camp, while in the little cemetery under the mountain sleep Fin Fin the traitor, Owlet the knowledge-box, Merced Monte, and "the rest."

THE END.

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